A General Manager's Eye View of the Casino

by Andrew Klebanow

Few people in the gaming organization can appreciate the view that the property general manager has of the casino. Unlike departmental managers, whose primary concerns center on the effectiveness of their departments and how their staff interacts with others, the GM sees how all of the departments interact.

While departmental managers may believe that their department should receive precious capital dollars over others, it is the general manager who truly understands how to prioritize the allocation of capital in order to best meet the needs of the organization. The slot director may sincerely believe that new gaming devices are the most important purchase that the casino should make, the security director may need additional surveillance equipment in order to preserve the safety of gaming patrons, and the information systems director may need new hardware to allow for fault tolerant data processing. Each of these managers believes their needs are most important.

The GM sees how all the parts fit in the gaming organization. The GM is thus the final arbiter in deciding what gets purchased and when. The view that general managers of all casinos have is better than anyone else's. They see things other people do not. They understand how to best achieve the property's mission, with one possible exception. General managers can sometimes have a distorted view of their own property's customer service.

In order to best describe the challenges that general managers have when it comes to understanding customer service in their gaming organizations, it is best to describe a recent experience. A consulting team was invited to facilitate a strategic planning session for a mid-sized gaming organization. At mid-day the team broke for lunch and the general manager invited the consultants to the property's 3-meal restaurant. Upon entering the restaurant the group was promptly greeted by a hostess and escorted to a table in the back of the restaurant reserved for the GM. Beverage orders were quickly taken as well as the meal order. Within ten minutes the meals were delivered and beverages were refilled. Two minutes later the server checked back to make sure everything was prepared to order and moments later the restaurant's manager stopped by. When everyone was done eating, the plates were cleared and the server presented the pastry tray. Coffee was served and the check was presented for signing.

That evening the consulting team returned to the same restaurant for dinner. However, their experience was rather different. Upon arrival they waited at the hostess podium for about five minutes before being greeted. The table that they were seated at had some paper debris on the floor and their booth had breadcrumbs on it. Their order was taken promptly but their beverages were never refilled and the server never came back to check to see if everything was cooked to order. Finally, they had to flag down a bus person in order to get a check. Overall, it was a mediocre experience.

During the next day's planning session, the consulting team asked participants what were the casino's competitive advantages in the marketplace. The GM mentioned that his property had far superior service than the competition. In fact, he mentioned that whenever he went to a competitor's casino, he would find service gaps in the restaurants and on the casino floor. He always had to wait at valet, the slot service was slow and the restaurants were inefficient. The service at his casino was far superior. He knew it, his customers knew it, and it should form the basis of their strategic plan.

What the general manager failed to realize is that the service he received was always different than what customers receive. In fact, all casino general managers receive better service than the general population. Without exception employees and supervisors at all casinos treat property leadership differently and unless the general manager is universally despised by his staff, the odds are he/she will receive far more attention and ultimately far better service than the general public. In the case of the aforementioned restaurant scenario, when the GM entered, an informal communications network alerted the wait staff, kitchen crew and restaurant manager that the GM was in the room. The staff in turn did their best to make a positive impression on their boss. What the GM experienced may have been normal to him but certainly was not normal to the general public. Relying only on observation and experience, the GM can never get a true picture of a property's service levels.

In order to truly understand whether service standards are being met, a property must monitor and measure customer service. This occurs on three levels: qualitative research, quantitative research and statistical analysis. With these three measures in place, the GM can then get a true picture of customer service at the property.

"The GM sees how all the parts fit in the gaming organization. The GM is thus the final arbiter in deciding what gets purchased and when. The view that general managers have is usually better than anyone else's. They see things other people do not. They understand how to best achieve the property's mission, with one possible exception. General managers can sometimes have a distorted view of their own property's customer service."

Qualitative Research

Qualitative customer research can take place on a number of fronts. The most common methods are customer focus groups and mystery shopping programs. The former are comprised groups of loyal casino patrons who are invited to voice their concerns in a focus group setting. A moderator poses open-ended questions regarding service levels at both the host property and competitors' properties. From those groups, an understanding of service quality at the property emerges, which is summarized in a research report.

Mystery shopping programs have become prevalent in casinos. Professional shoppers visit the casino property, eat in the restaurants, gamble in the casino, stay in the hotel and take "snapshots" of service levels at each outlet by completing surveys of each service outlet. While one bad service encounter may not be cause of concern, over time an effective mystery shopping program will uncover consistent service gaps. One nationally branded gaming company has taken mystery shopping to another level and utilizes miniature video cameras, hidden in backpacks and shoulder bags. The resulting videos are then used as instructional tools to show individual employees how to better perform their tasks.

Two other tools are more basic and offer a barometer of service: speaking directly to front line employees and managers, and speaking to guests. When property leadership has discussions with front line employees and managers, a view of customer service can begin to be understood. While these results may be somewhat skewed with discussions of how great everyone is or how one employee really isn't up to par, these discussions help the GM see another side of customer service from the people who are offering it. Speaking to guests also gives a barometer to the overall guest experience. By talking to guests directly, usually "everything is fine" will be the most common response, but some guests will speak candidly about their recent experiences and where service was stellar or lacking. Combining these techniques with the others usually validates property leadership's view on customer service.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research measures customer service by polling the casino's customers through research surveys. Surveys are often administered on property as customers egress various outlets, by telephone after a customer has visited a casino or more recently by email and Internet, whereby the customer is asked to complete an online survey regarding their most recent visit to the casino. These studies offer statistically valid results in high enough sample sizes. Subsequent surveys can measure improvements or degradation in customer service levels.

Statistical Analysis

An often overlooked form of customer service measurement is a statistical analysis of data that the casino's various information systems collects on an ongoing basis. A restaurant's point-of-sale system will track dining cycle time. A slot management system can monitor the time it takes to complete a hand pay or the number of guests processed at the player rewards center. Each of these data sources can be used to monitor the various functional attributes of customer service.

With both qualitative and empirical data detailing how customers perceive the service levels at the casino, the general manager is in a much better position to remedy any service gaps. Without it, the GM only sees what is right about the service in the casino and never what needs to be improved. ♣

Andrew Klebanow is Principal of Gaming Market Advisors. He can be reached by calling (702) 547-2225 or email andrew@gamingmarketadvisors.com