

The Gaming Village Must Deliver An Exceptional Guest Experience By Martin R. Baird

As I write this column, I'm flying home from business meetings in Greece. For the record, I believe Greece is a wonderful country with outstanding casinos and some of the most warm, friendly and welcoming people you will ever meet. The people of Greece take hospitality to an entirely new level. I had many advocate-creating moments.

But I'm struggling with something. What happens to these cheerful people when they go to work? I hate to say it, but service in Greece is not good. As I visited a variety of businesses, I was almost always disappointed by the service. Employees at these establishments were often cold. At best, they were just going through the motions. There were exceptions, of course. So why can't those positive experiences be the norm?

Please understand that my comments are in no way a condemnation of Greece. If I was returning from Wisconsin or Indiana and had encountered the same situation there, I would ask the same question. But, alas, I am focusing my attention on Greece.

As I walked around Athens at night from 10 o'clock until early in the morning, the people who were out and about were friendly, laughing and having fun. They were with friends and enjoying the moment. But at work, they didn't smile or try to help customers have a positive experience. Here's a specific example. After dinner one evening, my hosts decided we should have something sweet. We walked a few steps down the street to an outdoor ice cream parlor. Our server was horrible. She was slow even by local standards. I mean amazingly slow. The table wasn't bussed when we arrived and it took a long time to get that simple job done. Timely service is important for any business. It's critical if you want customers to patronize you again. In addition to being slow, this young woman was miserable. She never smiled or tried to make our

visit fun. The brand of ice cream we had is known worldwide, so why not just buy it at a grocery store and take it home for enjoyment?

I can hear one of my Greek friends saying that this server was just having a bad day. Perhaps that was the case. Or maybe she doesn't like her job. I don't want to be rude but, as a customer, I simply do not care. Her problems are not my concern. When I choose to spend money, I want to have a positive experience. It's not about the server. It's about me and my family or friends and what we get for the money we pay. In other words, the price of the ice cream also includes a premium for the experience.

The next day, I had lunch with a friend and we talked about the fact that the restaurant charged three Euros for a beverage that probably cost one Euro. I explained that the customer pays one Euro for the drink and the rest of the money is for the experience, the service and the use of a glass. Customers always pay a premium for the experience and that is why it should be a wonderful one.

What does all this have to do with casinos? Face it, folks, I am just like your guests. Your guests have the same expectations I do. The last thing in the world you want is for them to whine to others about the lousy gaming experience they had at your property. Greek retailers need to pay more attention to their customers and you need to focus more on your guests.

I used the word "village" in the headline for this column because that is what the Greeks call a small community of a few thousand people. The reality today is that we have a gaming village. We have a few thousand casinos that dot the landscape of the globe. It really is a small community and casinos cannot afford to get it wrong. Now is

the time for the gaming village to take action about the way its people deliver the product, which is service.

As I visit casinos around the world, I can't help but wonder if the people who work there are that miserable when they go home or out with friends. Are they just sour by nature? Or does the flogging start when they arrive for work? If some of your employees are miserable, please do the humane thing and remove them. The world has a place for them. It's just not working in a people business like gaming. If the problem is the floggings, why are you doing that? I think most people are good, kind, friendly and hospitable. How are you managing to mess that up? I say "manage" because I think poor service has a lot to do with the way people are handled by their supervisors. Are you inspiring your employees to create an amazing experience for each and every guest or are you telling them about the 99 ways they can be fired?

I like the concept of a village. One of the advantages of a village is that people work together and help each other out. I know that at some level casinos compete with each other. Each casino wants guests to spend entertainment dollars only at their property. But set your competitive nature aside for a moment and think about this – if all casinos gave their guests a better experience, wouldn't the entire market expand?

Gaming is wildly successful and that's probably why no one steps back and asks what would make the whole industry better. Business executives often talk about their stakeholders. By that, they mean their employees, customers and investors/owners. Well, doesn't the entire gaming village have a stake in the future?

It all starts with your guests and the experience they have at your property. What do they see when they arrive? How are they treated by your employees? Do they have

fun? Do they get their money's worth for the premium they pay? Turn them into advocates for your property instead of whiners.

Martin R. Baird is chief executive officer of Robinson & Associates, Inc., a customer service consulting firm that helps casinos worldwide determine their Advocate Index, a number that indicates the extent to which properties have guests who are willing to be advocates, and then implements its Advocate Development System to create more guest advocates and generate future growth and profitability. Robinson & Associates may be reached at mbaird@casinocustomerservice.com or 480-991-6420. The company Web sites are www.advocatedevelopmentsystem.com and www.casinocustomerservice.com.