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Restaurants as Part of the

f & b

'TOTAL PACKAGE'

By David Rothschild

We were in a carnival-themed casino recently and couldn't help but wonder why a New York-style delicatessen and a TGI Fridays ended up there. To us, these operations were incongruous with the image and ambience the property was trying to convey.

After doing a little research, we found these restaurants were not part of the original food and beverage offerings at the casino. Sometimes, after maybe a year or two, some of the original restaurant concepts need tweaking — or rethinking. The restaurants aren't generating the guest counts or the revenues that were anticipated. Management decides something new and different is needed.

So, while the deli and casual chain didn't meld into the overall theme of the casino we visited, they were most likely selected to meet consumer expectations and demand. Could the operators have done more to make their foodservice compatible with the property's overall theme? Probably. But there are many

factors involved in the decision-making process. Let's take a look at a few.

Converting an existing space into a new restaurant can be challenging. It's rarely a turnkey situation. There might be physical aspects of the facility that prohibit redevelopment. Even a limited local labor pool can be a deterrent. Say, for example, that you've determined there's a market for an upscale restaurant in your area. Where do you find kitchen help with fine-dining experience? Are you equipped to train front-of-house staff that, until now, has only worked in more casual environments? These sorts of obstacles have driven many casinos, both native and commercial, to seek other options. When you're outside of your comfort zone, sometimes it makes sense to bring in someone with more of a focus on F&B.

Leasing space to a multi-unit restaurant operator (at the food court or as a freestanding restaurant) is becoming more and more common. The casino benefits from having a national — or international — restaurant brand on property. New recipes are developed on a regular basis, continuing training and support are provided. There is potential for the restaurant to be a selling point to help increase room sales and revenues. Casino management can concentrate on gaming and leave the restaurant in the hands of more experienced food and beverage professionals.

There are advantages from the diner's perspective, too. Guests find the brand recognition comforting. They believe they'll get familiar food at a reasonable price. There's no apprehension about taking a chance on the unknown.

Other casinos opt to bring in an outside contractor to build-out a "one-size-fits-all" restaurant. They'll opt for a steakhouse, Italian trattoria, or perhaps an Asian noodle or sushi bar. But are the operators really thinking about how the concept meshes with the casino's theme and how appropriate it is for the property's clientele? Have you — or the contractor — studied your demographics to determine what's viable and most likely to succeed? Have you considered whether your current F&B team or new hires will be skilled, efficient and confident at operating the new concept?

Maybe you're considering partnering with a nationally or locally prestigious chef to open a restaurant. Again, keep your theme and your gaming population in mind. Should you lean more toward Paula Deen (as in the case of Harrah's Tunica) or Guy Savoy? And does the chef's specialty fit your — and your diners' — needs?

The Loews Royal Pacific at Universal Studios in Orlando, Fla., is Asian-themed and brought in Emeril Lagasse to open a restaurant. On the surface, this doesn't look like a great fit. Chef Lagasse is known for his New Orleans cuisine. But, according to the Loews Web site, "Emeril's Tchoup Chop (pronounced chop chop)... takes Asian cuisine and 'kicks it up a notch.'"

Bringing in a celebrity chef has its advantages.

The casino can use the chef's name, fame and likeness to market the restaurant. He or she will help design the space and the menu and create and standardize recipes. The property usually retains the right to sign-off on the concept, design and menu. The celeb chef will work with the restaurant's chef de cuisine for several weeks prior to the opening and is required to spend a set amount of time at the property over the course of the year. The expectation is that diners will flock to the restaurant because of the chef's notoriety and the foodie status symbol of saying that they've eaten there. Many times, bringing in a highly recognized chef can be a big boost to your F&B operations. However, unless the "name on the door" is also a "face in the kitchen" on a regular basis, the mystique can fade quickly.

New casinos are faced with the prospect of not only opening up a gaming operation, but also building food and beverage from the ground up. This is your opportunity to look at all aspects of your planned venues and ensure, from the start, that you're developing strong tie-ins with your casino's look, atmosphere and predicted clientele. Here are some important things to keep in mind when creating a new restaurant or rebranding an existing one:

- Is your concept a good fit for the area/location? Is your new restaurant drastically different than what's currently being offered in the area? Think long and hard about why no one has opened this type of place before.
- Is the concept appropriate for your casino clientele? Is it what they want? Focus groups can be a useful tool in determining your guests' dining preferences.
- Are your hours of operation realistic? Your upscale restaurants might do gangbuster business at dinner — maybe even Sunday brunch — but will the tables be full for Tuesday lunches?
- Does it compete too closely with others on property? Be especially careful not to offer very similar dishes at different price points at several restaurants.
- Does the menu remain consistent with the concept? Resist the temptation to offer "something for everyone" and dilute your culinary focus.
- Is the pricing well thought out? Will your diners perceive their meals as a good value?
- Have you considered what delivery system will be used? Guests order and pick up their food at a counter? Food delivered to the table? In a table service restaurant, hand-carrying or tray-carrying? If you're considering tableside preparations, know that this requires team service and a highly trained staff.
- Is the ambiance consistent with overall theme? Have you selected the most effective lighting, music, décor and uniforms?
- Does your service team have the appropriate experience and expertise? Are their strengths utilized — friendly, folksy staff in your casual restaurants; more genteel and polished people in fine dining?
- Is your tabletop relevant to the concept? Colorful linens and fanciful napkin folds for a festive look; heavyweight silver, fine china and crystal for a more subdued, sophisticated feel.
- Have you established a good line of communication between your F&B and marketing departments to develop promotions and specials that will appeal to potential diners, be possible for the staff to implement and be cost-effective?

As you contemplate new F&B venues or changes in existing ones, take a look at the image and atmosphere you're trying to convey throughout your casino. Take an even closer look at the guests who visit your property. Then consider what options will best help you to tie it all together into a "total package" that will resonate with your guests' expectations. **NAC**

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