

9 GUIDELINES FOR

CASINO WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT



The competitive landscape in gaming continues to intensify in ways that call for a strategic shift in marketing focus.

THE NEW MEASURES OF SUCCESS

In the current environment, category maturity and product saturation have created a world where too many competitors are chasing too few customers. As a result, share of customer has replaced share of market as the key metric of success.

To remain competitive in this environment, the vast majority of casinos must condition rated patrons to a steady diet of incentive offers in the mail. This reinvestment strategy remains the foundation of every solid casino database marketing program, but as the category has matured it has gradually become a zero-sum game where the bar keeps getting raised. Customer expectations keep rising because competitors keep matching every move.

It is useful to think about this dilemma in terms of sustainable competitive advantages. For years, we have been able to rely on the old Four Ps of marketing to remain vital. Today, this solution has become the problem—the Four Ps are simply too easy to copy.

Everyone uses direct mail (placement) to deliver offers (price and promotion) inviting patrons to return to the casino (product). If there is even the slightest hiccup in contact frequency or reward value, we run the risk of the losing of wallet share to a more aggressive competitor. The vagaries of production lead-time and postal delivery constantly threaten the delicate balance of the right-message/right-time equation.

While it is unlikely that we will ever liberate ourselves completely from direct mail dependency, we can begin to build competitive barriers by rethinking our sustainable competitive advantages.

ANYTHING THAT CAN BE COPIED IS NOT SUSTAINABLE

While every casino has unique competitive advantages, I believe there are only two that are truly sustainable—and every casino has both: brand and database. No competitor can copy who we are and how our customers feel about us; and no one can copy the information we keep on our customers and how we use it.

Now, more than ever, the key to customer loyalty lies in building and integrating our brand and database. The best way to do this of course is through the customer's on-property experience—providing the right experience to the right customers. Contemporary branding experts agree that brand equity and brand loyalty are strengthened much more through experience (actual product usage) than communications (advertising and direct mail). Beyond actual on-property experience, the casino website is a close second in its ability to build and integrate brand and database. The website is a dynamic, interactive touch-point that—when linked with the infinite segmentation capabilities of the database—can create greater personal relevance and value than any other contact point. The website can be a pathway to more intimate and more profitable relationships.

Yet, for most casinos this potential goes largely untapped.

THE TIME TO RETHINK YOUR WEBSITE IS NOW

The first step to creating and leveraging a truly interactive website experience lies in seeing it as an essential component of your customer loyalty program. But success requires much more than a “build it and they will come” mentality.

Here then are 9 essential guidelines to help you build a website that will help you drive revenue, deepen loyalty and increase profits while building sustainable barriers to the competition.

- 1 **Set objectives first:** Like any other marketing initiative, your website requires establishing objectives that revolve around realistic, measurable retention, loyalty and revenue metrics. For the vast majority of casinos, competitive conditions dictate that the website should be designed to win share and drive revenues from current customers. Therefore, creating frequent interactions and transactions from current customers should be a number-one strategic priority. So, think of your website as your customer resource center, where customers can get privileged, easy access to everything about you that is relevant to them.
- 2 **Drive visitation:** In the packaged goods and consumer products world, brand loyalty is synonymous

with repeat purchase. In the casino world, it is synonymous with repeat visitation and length of stay. The same is true online. Each visit to your site offers the potential to create a positive brand interaction. Therefore, all media communications (online, offline and on-property) should seek to drive customers to the site for a range of value-added benefits and interactions that are precursors to property visits. This includes reservations for hotels, events, shows, tournaments, dining and other guest services. It also includes making the website the preferred place to find relevant incentive offers that are tailored to individual gaming behavior and preferences. Remember, the easier you make website interactions and transactions, the more routine they will become, and the more conditioned customers will become to rely on your site when planning gaming visits.

- 3 **Use the power of recognition and reward:** These two fundamental benefits are the backbone of your players club, representing the emotional and rational reasons why customers remain loyal to you. They should also be central to your website strategy. Think in terms of private access and exclusive privileges for players club members. Easy access to point balances, online redemptions and other personalized features will create a sense of entitlement and empowerment.
- 4 **Take advantage of drama and suspense:** People gamble to win. But they also gamble for the competitive thrill. Regular casino patrons love games of chance and you can take advantage of this behavioral phenomenon by integrating your website into all current promotions in order to drive visitation and create involvement at your site.
- 5 **Stress function over form:** Flash websites win awards but lose customers. Nothing is more annoying to a regular visitor than to be forced to wade through a commercial every time they log on. Resist the temptation to make your website an electronic brochure. Familiarity, ease, intuition and resourcefulness are the navigational requirements frequent visitors demand. Take a cue from Amazon, Orbitz, Marriott, Continental Airlines and others. What makes these websites great is an understanding that current customers don't visit them to be entertained. They visit to interact!

- 6 **Leverage the strength and synergy of email:** By far the greatest driver of website visitation is email. Because of its delivery speed, cost efficiency and customizability, email marketing is the perfect tool to leverage the two potent attributes of direct marketing: personalization and segmentation. Ironically, the email address field is the most underutilized field in casino databases. Remember, your customers are regularly interacting through email with airlines, hotels, financial services firms, car rental companies and many others. They would likely welcome the opportunity to connect with you this way if the opportunity is presented in the right way. Building and maintaining an email list takes patience and a commitment to best practices. Initially, email's best role may be that of a supplemental medium when cost, intimacy and speed are key factors. But don't lose sight of the fact that the people most likely to use your site are likely to prefer email to regular mail. You may soon find that some customers can even be migrated away from direct mail for regular core direct marketing communications.

- 7 **Commit to analytics:** Any solid direct marketing program is based on a four-part process: identification, interaction, differentiation and customization. Because of the digital platform, your website provides fertile opportunity to enrich your customer knowledge. Take advantage of the activity logs created by your web server and analytical packages that help identify and track online behavior. Measure and test each and every email campaign to continually refine effectiveness. Seek to match online behavior and preferences back to your data-warehouse. Monitor and exploit the connection between online activity and on-property visitation. The ultimate benefit will be your ability to continually enhance and refine the relevance and effectiveness of the total customer experience—online, offline and on-property.

- 8 **Encourage feedback and dialog:** Relationships are all about dialog and websites make dialog easy. Encourage customers to share their comments and concerns about your casino because customers who voice opinions care more and are likely to be better customers. Of course, you must see each comment as an opportunity for a personalized brand-building response. An easy-to-find phone number manned by real people and a regularly monitored “contact us”

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button are essential to building your brand one customer at a time. Over the years, research has consistently proven that a resolved complaint results in a stronger relationship than if the complaint never happened. Your website is also an excellent survey research medium. The combination of email and the website facilitates quick, efficient focus groups. Just make sure that if you ask for input, you reply individually. Research should be positioned for the customer's benefit, not yours.

In a world where there are too many competitors for too few customers, brand loyalty is fragile. One negative experience, such as an unanswered complaint or unheeded request for more information, can quickly undermine a relationship. If you make a commitment to build, protect and integrate your brand and database in the digital world, you will ensure a consistently positive experience that gets stronger with each subsequent visit—and leaves competitors scrambling to catch up.

- 9 **Remember there's no such thing as a neutral message:** Every contact with a customer has the ability to lift or erode how he or she feels about you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — KARL DENTINO



In his 28-year career, Karl Dentino has created successful direct marketing programs for casinos such as Caesars, Sands, Isle of Capri, Trump Castle, and others, along with Fortune 500 companies such as Avis, Chase, Citibank, MasterCard, Prudential, Merrill Lynch, Procter & Gamble, Kraft and Columbia House.

Since 1987, Karl has been President of Dentino Marketing, a leading database marketing services firm and consultancy headquartered in New Jersey. In 2005, Karl was inducted into the New Jersey Advertising Hall Of Fame. He is a much in-demand teacher and lecturer whose speeches at conferences held by the Direct Marketing Association, Bank Marketing Association, Australian Direct Marketing Association, New Zealand Direct Marketing Association and others have been highly acclaimed. Karl was a panelist at G2E in 2005.

Karl is also noted for his work in educating students and professors on behalf of the Direct Marketing Educational Foundation. In 1994 he was appointed Dean of its flagship educational program, The Direct Marketing Collegiate Institute. His book, *Business Reply: How To Use Direct Marketing Techniques To Get The Job You Want*, was published in 1995 by the Direct Marketing Educational Foundation and is available to all on the DMEF website. He was appointed to the DMEF Board of Trustees in 1997.

For more information visit:

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