

PULLING CREATIVE RISK OUT OF RADICAL DISRUPTION

HOW ORDER AND TIMING CAN TURN ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

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There is a critical order and timing that exists for when meaningful and lasting change can happen. That kind of thinking can be applied to the current state of the world, including the gaming industry. As with any social experiment, the most powerful outcomes stem from jarring cause and effects. COVID-19 has become the largest cause of our lifetime and what arises from our reactions to it will be the metric of our greatest effects towards the future. The forced nature of the ‘six-feet-apart’ rule, finding new ways to decrease the frequency of high-touch points, as well as macro- and micro- capacity limitations should be looked at as a temporary but important cue to how the guest experience needs to evolve in a drastic way. That is what Las Vegas is built for—to take on the creative risk of pushing the dial of design, setting the rudder for the rest of the entertainment world. The city thrives on creating these unique experiences to a wide range of visitors from all over the world, from the high roller regular to the penny slot stalker.

The future of gaming does not settle into the notion that technology will be our savior. Studies show that the industry keeps trying to tap into Millennials, who prefer the in-person interaction aspect of a casino. The gaming floor alone, however, does not hold the attraction for this generation. The involvement and integration of with food and entertainment is key to the nature of gaming. The collective social experience tops the list. Millenni-

als value varied options at an integrated resort and the personalization of their experience. This concept exists with or without COVID-19, but the pandemic forces us to look at these environments with a more critical eye and perhaps allow us the opportunity to make more daring design moves.

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Sliding into August—our 8th month of the pandemic world, many gaming properties have re-opened with cautious approaches and measured rules, depending on their respective state mandates. The tourism demographic plays an integral role in how they can effectively respond to these changing times through design. A small local casino that caters to a bubbled region may not have the same challenges with crowd and spatial control as a large integrated resort does. Nonetheless, the draw for those guests is still rooted in the natural rush of the experience.

Understanding the limited capacities on the actual gaming floor would be a rung on the ladder to incorporate into this ap-

proach. For example, a gaming property overseas has been held to only three people per table game, as opposed to the regular seven to nine players, greatly limiting the level of total table spend. Yet, they still need the same number of staff/dealers to run the tables. Slot capacity on the floor has also been reduced to 55% in that same casino, leading their revenue numbers to at least 20% less than the previous year at the same time. Generally, what these observations are telling us is to reach the same level of play on the same floor, the space itself must grow or branch out into areas where gaming was not held before. This property services a home-based market, but destination-based markets like Las Vegas can learn from these lessons in maximizing gaming floor design.

Other key social shifts are also taking place within these casinos since reopening, such as the call to remove or limit smoking inside the property. Smoking, gambling, and drinking have all been synonymous with each other in these establishments, and for many successful reasons. With the highly transmittable nature of COVID through the air and added risk to smokers specifically, it only seems natural to consider sacrificing the part for the greater whole. A prominent casino in Washington state took the leap to re-open completely smoke-free, truly an admirable risk, in an effort to gauge where their client base stood on the frequently contested issue. To their delighted surprise, their guests gave more positive feedback than expected, pushing

them to work towards making the smoke-free aspect part of their permanent amenities list. Operational shifts like this can affect the design of a gaming floor as well in a huge way.

tion of natural air filtration through greenery and the concept of bringing the outside in, and vice versa, can be considered as taking over those once unpleasant spaces in a casino. Weaving this natural environ-

these queues normally would remain hidden within the restaurant or behind screens into a nightclub. But with the increased spacing even before entering the venues, these lines now stretch into the gaming floor itself. Is there an opportunity there to take advantage of the time in the queue? Rather than lining the perimeter, blocking other venue entries and exposure, we can utilize design to dictate where these lines form and eventually connect to. The concept arising of connecting destination points on the gaming floor through gaming neighborhoods created by these lines is an intriguing study that might bring to light other ways of looking at an open field of slot machines and table games. Designing within the field.

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Other gaming properties throughout the country have had smoke-free environments prior to the pandemic, and even Las Vegas has its first, major smoke-free casino-resort, Park MGM. However, the need to analyze how these spaces once catering to the smoker—with ash trays, heavily utilized air-filtration systems, odor and burn resistant fabric and finishes, to name a few—has to go beyond the marketing of being ‘smoke-free’. Looking at the integra-

mental thread through the gaming floor would also contribute to the increased slot machine spacing and table game layouts that would most likely continue moving forward. Designing within the void.

Another opportunity not to overlook is queuing for venues. With the limited capacity of restaurants, retail, and soon entertainment spaces, lines have been a constant and usual sight—wrapping around buildings and perimeters. Within a casino,

Creative order and timing need to be recognized during these times because we have no choice but to move forward. While many in the industry think that ‘normal’ was how things were before the pandemic, I am pushing for an approach where nothing was normal, only part of the order and timing of that moment. The gaming industry, especially in Las Vegas, always had its finger on the pulse of what people will enjoy and value. Instead of waiting for things to ‘get back to normal’, let’s take what is right in front of us and continue to change the game. ■

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But even that is not the key metric. The top of the pyramid of KPI’s includes net funds to good causes, preservation of integrity and reputation of the Texas Lottery brand, protection of the consumer and responsible gaming. There is nothing new or innovative about our decision-making and planning process. We are just applying the longer view towards realizing the ROI on investment. That “we” includes our technology partners and our retailers. Investment in modernization can be thought of as a short-term “loss leader” that positions us for maximization of long-term ROI. It is a gateway to get to an end result of dramatically increasing the number of lottery touch points in the public domain, and moving the scratch ticket product into the in-lane channel will yield large returns for the Texas Lottery, which has already delivered over \$31 billion to good causes in Texas since our inception twenty-eight years ago. Our fiscal year just concluded on August 31st

was the ninth straight year of record lottery revenue with over \$1.6 billion generated for public education and veterans’ services. That long-term record of growth in the face of a variety of challenges and economic conditions doesn’t happen by accident.

We are excited about how innovation and new initiatives will shape our future in a positive way, serving the interests of the next generation of Lottery stakeholders. I must say I am very grateful to our vendor community. We do business with IGT Printing, Pollard and Scientific Games equally for the production of our scratch ticket products, and IGT Texas is our lottery operator. Each of these vendor partners understands our desire to drive sales and revenue for the good causes in our states. In that sense, we are perfectly aligned with them in getting this done.

It’s almost as if the pandemic proved the adage “necessity is the mother of invention.”

G. GRIEF: I can’t disagree, and I have to tell you I have an outstanding team at the Texas Lottery, not just in the marketing and product areas but in the operations, administrative, financial and legal areas as well. To be an effective lottery organization or any kind of organization, every department must be focused on the same goal and have the same values. Likewise, our business partners at IGT Texas, led by Joe Lapinski, are in sync with our business goals. IGT Texas and the Texas Lottery work together every single day and we are jointly focused on the exact same thing - growing net proceeds for public education and veterans’ services. Once that goal is clearly delineated, and you know exactly where you need to go, you can figure out how to get there if you have enough smart people in the room. Texas is extremely fortunate - we’ve got plenty of those people here. ■