

# Nurturing an industry-wide culture of collaboration and support

**Cindy Polzin**

*Director, Wisconsin Lottery*

*President, North American Association of State & Provincial Lotteries (NASPL)*



**PGRI Introduction:** As Cindy Polzin says “I’ve been in politics my whole life.” She served for fifteen years in state government including Deputy Chief of Staff to the governor of Wisconsin in 2016 just prior to her appointment to lead the Wisconsin Lottery. That prepared her for some of the mission-critical functions of a lottery director. For the rest, she learned on the job. This discussion is largely about that process. How does a new director, who often has no experience in this industry, or business management or consumer products marketing, begin the leadership role on day one? Now, seven plus years later, Cindy brings a fun and thoughtful perspective to this interesting journey.



**WISCONSIN LOTTERY**

**Paul Jason:** What a fabulous NASPL annual conference & Trade Show you hosted last October in Milwaukee.

**Cindy Polzin:** Yes, wasn't that special? I have known the NASPL team for many years now, but gained a newfound respect for them, seeing everything that needs to be done to make all the parts move in the right direction at the right time to produce a great event. Since it was in Milwaukee, I wanted there to be a Wisconsin touch and feeling on everything. And since I was going to be NASPL president, I wanted a true understanding of what the NASPL and Wisconsin Lottery staff and others

have to go through for these conferences. Walking side-by-side with them and seeing David Gale's (Executive Director of NASPL) leadership and all of the hard work that his very close team put into it is truly astonishing.

**It's so great to recognize the talent and hard work that goes into a production like that. David Gale and Team NASPL deliver on that front and others as well.**

**C. Polzin:** Yes! Now that I have been in president of NASPL, I see just how much they do. Of course, we are all aware of the educational seminars and other outputs of the association. But getting up close

and personal with all the work involved to produce the seminars and deliver all the services provided by NASPL has given me a new perspective and appreciation for David Gale and Team NASPL. I feel so blessed for the opportunity to get to know them so well over the past year. I'm sure there were times David Gale wished I wasn't so involved! But in the end, I think we worked very well together. And honestly, I am forever grateful for them and their support and all that they do to make this industry what it is today. And a shout-out to our vendor partners who are so vital to the success of this industry and so appreciated for their support and guidance on the conferences too. I'm probably speaking for you and Susan too, who already know what it's like to produce an event like this.

**Yes you are, thank you, Cindy! Susan and I work great together, as long as I never forget who the real boss is! But there's no comparison to what NASPL does. The number and scale of their events and services increases the complexity and challenge exponentially.**

**C. Polzin:** We changed it up a little bit last year for Brewing the Best in Milwaukee. We wanted to celebrate a little bit of Wisconsin culture and so I hope everyone loved it! The main thing is that we need to push ourselves to evolve, to disrupt and reinvent and try new things. Mistakes will be made and learned from and that's okay because it is the only way to drive progress.

**“The main thing is that we need to push ourselves to evolve, to disrupt and reinvent and try new things.”**

This year in Kansas City will be something new as well. The focus will be on the conference as there won't be a trade-show. Our valued sponsors and vendor partners are helping more than ever as well. It will be an interesting event with a whole different feeling to it. The trade-show component to the annual NASPL event will be back in 2025. That will be in Niagara Falls, which should afford lots of opportunity to do some fresh and different things as well. But we are all gearing up and excited about A State of Winning from Sept. 9-12 in Kansas City. NASPL, and Lester Elder's (Exec Director of Missouri Lottery) whole team at the Missouri Lottery, the vendor partners, and everyone involved are all stretching to produce a refreshed and fabulous conference event. They all deserve a lot of respect for all they are doing to create a new and special experience. I promise everyone will be impressed by the format, the content, the social and networking time, and love the whole experience!

**What are some of the high-priority goals of your tenure as president of NASPL?**

**C. Polzin:** I appreciate and am humbled by the opportunity to serve as president of NASPL. The presiden-

cy is for only one year, so part of our job is to just provide continuity for strategic plans that are already in place. But I do have two goals. My first goal is prefaced with a bit of a story. I was appointed lottery director in 2016. The first time I met my colleagues was at a MUSL strategic planning meeting in Iowa in Spring of 2017. Of course, I did not know anyone. I don't think I even knew what "MUSL" or "NASPL" stands for. And I walked into the room and realized I didn't know what I was doing there, or what was expected of me. It was very uncomfortable, right? Thankfully I sat next to this lovely man named Gary Grief, who helped me get acquainted with things. The interim Director of the Wisconsin

Lottery before me told me to find a woman named Sarah Taylor – that she would be a great mentor and friend for me. She was and is to this day!

The long and short of it is that we should make it easier for new directors to be brought up to speed on who does what, on the mission and purpose of the different

associations, committees, working groups, task forces, etc. So one of my goals was to start a mentorship program for new directors. We now have a skeleton blueprint for that. My friend Adam Prock (Director of Minnesota Lottery) had the same idea which we discussed shortly after I was elected president of NASPL. Adam's guidance has been very helpful as the program developed. Team NASPL put together and we sent it out a first version of the new director mentorship program for directors to review. Since that time, there have been at least five new directors appointed. I want to also thank the four regional directors of NASPL for their support and engagement. They have always been so generous with their time to pitch in and help me and others as needed.

David Gale has always reached out to the new director, to introduce NASPL, offer to help or connect, talk any time, etc. After that, the regional director reaches out to the new director and offers their mentorship or to find another director who may have experience or insights into particular issues that the new director is interested in. I, of course, also reach out to the new director. We share with them the activities of the associations and ask them if they have thoughts on how they might like to be involved with NASPL, MUSL, and the industry in general so we might offer guidance on how to proceed. The new crop of directors since I've been president are outstanding! I can't wait to see what they bring to the industry!

The new director gets great guidance from their own senior staff. Of course, we all so value our senior executive team, and all our staff, as they are the ones who keep this business running. But there are some issues that can only be understood by someone at the director level, someone who truly understands the complex diversity of stakeholders. Too, incumbent staff is likely to be too invested in procedures and methods that have been in place for years and may be ready for a change. The new director needs friends in a similar position to help them navigate some of these issues. So, I am proud of this initiative, proud of David and the regionals for advancing it, and



Cindy at Vending Machine

*Continued on page 49*



hope that it continues after I am no longer president. An important missing link right now is vendor partner involvement, which I think is critical. But at least we started it so the new directors know they can reach out to any of us and can connect with a mentor as they like.

My second goal revolves around engagement. What makes this industry so special is the personal relationships, which are an invaluable resource for advice and guidance. We do not compete with each other and so there is no barrier to sharing and helping each other. Too, while we all seem to be keenly aware of our differences, there are far more commonalities to the way our businesses operate. So there is hardly a single issue or problem that has not been faced by someone in our industry. NASPL itself has tremendous resources - facts, data, and information - that can be helpful. Or one state may identify with the gaming and pop culture of another state and decide to share ideas and even creative when it comes to advertising and promotions. Think about the incredible redundancies of 45-plus lotteries all separately paying to reinvent the wheel instead of working together and building a brain-trust that would help to defray costs, increase efficiencies, and otherwise optimize outcomes. Of course, we already do share and work together a lot. NASPL, MUSL and others do a great job of facilitating interaction. I just think there is a lot of opportunity for more engagement amongst NASPL directors, vendor partners, and folks like yourselves at PGRI that are friends of the lottery industry. These things are being discussed and I hope we continue to build out more formal structures that facilitate collaboration within our industry.

We heard about some of the fabulous results that can be achieved by collaboration at your last PGRI conference. David Barden and a team of MUSL directors have completely reshaped the landscape of co-branding and promotional initiatives. NASCAR and New Year's Rockin' Eve First Powerball Millionaire with Ryan Seacrest being a couple examples. The MUSL directors emphasized, though, how important it is for them to approach uber-brands like the NFL with the full support and engagement of all lotteries. It makes all the difference to our ability to maximize the value of our brand, and therefore the terms and conditions they can negotiate

with potential brand partners.

Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent by U.S. on advertising every year. Surely there are more ways that we can collaborate and find ways to create templates that can be shared by multiple lotteries. And maybe save tens of millions of dollars?

And how about RFP's and RFI's? NASPL has fabulous resources to streamline and modernize the compilation of information that goes into these documents. We just need further engagement and buy-in to these initiatives, some of which are in process already.

### **An example of advice you were given early on?**

**C. Polzin:** It was from a colleague on the vendor partner side, not a lottery director. His comment when I first started was for me to listen and ask questions. Ask why they are doing things the way they are, even if I do not feel like I am in a position to weigh in on it. Ask staff to just explain why they think the way they think. That was a great way to learn the business. I took his advice and after a year, I asked him for a new directive for year two. He told me to continue to ask questions, but now make sure I resist the temptation to tell them what to do. Let the team do what they do every day and stay out of their way. I truly believe in and trust my team. And they have produced a 63% increase in sales in the short time I've been here.

### **And now you are so much more knowledgeable and effective as an industry leader than you were seven years ago. It is a shame the industry is not able to capitalize more on the experience gained by lottery directors who are allowed to serve a longer tenure.**

**C. Polzin:** I think that's the toughest part of this industry. There are so many talented, solid, smart, hard-working directors, who are asked to leave after an election ushers in a change of political parties, just when they were getting up to speed. It is probably the one obstacle to this industry achieving its full potential. It is also difficult on the staff who is trying to execute on longer-term strategic plans. It is hard to maintain momentum and continuity with so many changes of leadership. And they don't know if the incoming director will be a micro-manager who does not know what

they don't know and wants to dive in and change everything. Fortunately, most of us have good intentions and are smart enough to not interfere and mess things up! It would still be better if industry leaders were given longer terms to accomplish more ambitious goals and contribute more to optimizing multi-state games and strategies.

### **What does the future hold for the Wisconsin Lottery?**

**C. Polzin:** Wisconsin operates within even stricter limits than most lotteries. No iLottery or games like Keno. So we look at distribution as being the place we can innovate to drive sales. Wisconsin has a large tavern industry so we are working hard to penetrate that sector. We did just implement a mobile app with our vendor partner IGT to a phenomenal reception. Players love it!

I have a great relationship with our legislature. I was in politics all my life and so I have a lot of dear friends that are both legislators and legislative staff that I'm very comfortable just to pick up the phone and say, hey, what do you think about this idea for the lottery. They can give me guidance on which ideas should be run up the flagpole. For most things, the issue is already decided. State statutes, for instance, prohibit iLottery. But we have succeeded at getting some laws amended to allow us more flexibility to improve results and funding for our beneficiary which is property tax relief. Like almost all lotteries, our business would make excellent use of more resources in general. Responsible gaming, research, sales, marketing and advertising would all benefit with the end result being more funds generated for Wisconsin taxpayers. Lotteries are the most responsible stewards of resources. I don't think there are any billion-dollar consumer products companies that contain operating expenses to 5% or 6% of revenues like most U.S. lotteries do. Ours is 5.1%. Credit to the support we get from the legislature and our stakeholders along with the incredible Wisconsin Lottery staff who knows their job is to produce the results with the resources we have. I am so proud of them for their dedication, talent, ingenuity, and hard work. These people are the heart and soul of the industry and make my job the most rewarding job in the world. ■