

THE NEW CUSTOMER STRATEGY HOTSPOT: VEGAS BABY! **By Martha Rogers, Ph.D.**

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. But you have to get there first. That's where travel site Vegas.com comes in. Its niche, as the domain name suggests, is everything Vegas.

"We don't care about the 200 other cities in North America, we only care about Las Vegas -- and that matters, because Vegas is really complex to understand and navigate, no matter how many times you've been here," says Howard Lefkowitz, CEO of Vegas.com. Billing itself as "the official Vegas travel site" (referring to Vegas Magazine, a publication of Vegas.com owner Greenspun Corp.), the Web site has positioned itself to become a trusted agent for those interested in all aspects of Sin City.

Just having the right name wasn't enough to make a successful business venture. Prior to 2002 the site was of comparatively little value because it had no clear proposition or mission. "When I got here about four years ago the site was basically an online magazine," Lefkowitz says. "It wasn't overly compelling, and it was not supportable from a business model perspective."

-- Gambling on the customer --

Lefkowitz upped the ante by shifting the site's focus from information to commerce, in a way that provided value to visitors looking for Las Vegas information and services. "Las Vegas is a unique beast as a destination. By definition, it is for very different types of people, and that [effects] what track you're on -- the family track, bachelor party track, getting-a-relationship-back track," he says. "From a demographic perspective, we do everything possible to make information available to the individual based on what they are looking for at that moment."

Lefkowitz says Vegas.com accomplishes that by following the mantra, "Think of yourself as the customer." That means deciding how the multitude of customer communities might wish to access and take advantage of each attraction on tap in the resort city. So Lefkowitz and his team created different categories of information containing everything from flight times to video updates on city conditions and activities, typically available in multiple views and from multiple locations. This includes a Spanish-language version of the site.

The customer-centric approach keeps information fresh for each visitor by updating crucial information more than 100 times per day, a pace Lefkowitz says is mandated by the rapid pace of change within the city itself. "It doesn't matter if you're a veteran or a newbie... even if you were here only three months ago, things have changed."

Its customer relationships extend to the B2B side as well. "Our relationship with our travel partners is critical -- we view them as customers," he told Internet Travel News last year. "We've created an entire department devoted

to working with our partners to make sure that we know their business and to make sure that they have an advocate inside of Vegas.com."

-- The personal touch --

As many companies learned through their Internet experiments, an online strategy alone cannot sustain most businesses. Vegas.com employs more than 100 contact center agents deeply ingrained in everything the city has to offer, many of them bilingual. "Those people live here, they're from here, their core competence is Vegas. We don't have a bunch of people off in a foreign land, they're very familiar with every showroom, every restaurant... they're truly Vegas experts," Lefkowitz says.

By Vegas.com's own reckoning, its success is substantial indeed. Based on visitor data, the company estimates that 65 percent of those seeking information about the city online will come to Vegas.com. And sales have grown more than 300 percent over the past year, although he won't reveal specific numbers. Lefkowitz says that with a customer-focused interaction strategy, Vegas.com can't lose.