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Jonathan Barsky

University of San Francisco, barsky@usfca.edu

Todor Tzolov

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Critical Behaviors and Trends of Casino Customers: A New Segmentation Model For The North American Gaming Industry

Jonathan Barsky, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA
Todor Tzolov, Market Metrix LLC, San Rafael, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This study presents a new customer segmentation model for the North American gaming industry based on 280,000 survey responses obtained in 2008 and 2009. The purpose of this model is to identify critical behaviors and trends of casino customers that will help casino management better understand and connect with their target customers. The new segmentation model splits the industry into distinct customer groups based on geo-demographic, behavioral and attitudinal dimensions. The results provide insight into brand preferences, the impact of loyalty programs, the role of social media, price sensitivity, key emotional drivers of loyalty, and demographic profiles of the casino customer.

INTRODUCTION

Gambling has existed since ancient times with evidence suggesting that even the earliest caveman was a gambler. But the popularity of gambling in many cultures has often led to severe restrictions or outright prohibition. The economic benefits and entertainment value of gambling has often been overshadowed by the social costs, such as pathological gambling, crime, and other maladies. Perhaps due to these significant effects, most gaming research has addressed the problems of excessive play focusing on social, economic and cultural dimensions that may underlie these behaviors.

This research has helped policy makers and the casino industry better understand the overall impact of gaming and has led to ethical and social responsibility policies. But due to the limited research focus on gaming's negative effects, business goals have received less attention. Very little research exists on fundamental business aspects of casinos and casino hotels such as brand choice (e.g., why select one casino over another), loyalty and price sensitivity.

Over the last 20 years legalized betting has grown tremendously; it's now a \$100 billion industry. A quarter of the U.S. adult population chooses to spend its entertainment dollars at a casino at least once a year, a significant figure given the myriad of entertainment options available. Casinos are vital to the states and communities where they operate, creating jobs and business opportunities for local vendors and suppliers and in 2008 provided more than \$5.6 billion in direct gaming tax revenues to stimulate struggling economies and help communities grow [1].

But as Americans became more affected by the recession, casino patrons cut their entertainment expenses. They took shorter trips for fewer days, and they spent less on high-end amenities like restaurants, shows and spas that are important sources of revenue for casino resorts. The lack of available capital has forced many gaming companies to delay new developments, and numerous projects have been cancelled altogether. This has made expansion much more difficult.

Despite the growth of the gaming industry in the past 10 years, and the recent challenges of the recession, most gaming research continues to focus on the problems of excessive play and has neglected fundamental business aspects of casinos and casino hotels such as brand choice, loyalty and price sensitivity.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to identify critical behaviors and trends of casino customers that will help casino management better understand and connect with their target customers. The new segmentation model will provide

insight into brand preferences, the impact of loyalty programs, the role of social media, price sensitivity, key emotional drivers of loyalty, and demographic profiles of the casino customer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why do people gamble? When and where do they gamble, and what game will they choose? Researchers have attempted to answer these questions using two general approaches: motivational models and involvement models. Motivational models focus on motives for participating in gambling, and the second, involvement models, provide schemes explaining varying degrees of involvement in gambling. Motivational models apply mostly to the leisure gambler and the involvement models account for problem gamblers. Because most gaming research has focused on the ‘involvement’ arena, studies have primarily considered the problems of excessive play and on the dimensions that underlie these behaviors.

Motivational Models. When individuals are asked in questionnaires about their reasons for gambling, the answer “to win” or “to win money” is often the most common response. This is natural, since money is the tangible reward of gambling, which makes money “the dominant language of gambling” [6]. However, everyone with any experience of gambling knows that the motives for participating vary considerably between games and gamblers. For example, a study of recreational casino gambling in the U.S. identified eight motivational components of gambling: learning and evaluating, a “rush”, self-definition, risk-taking, self-classification, emotional self-classification, competing, and communing [5]. Motivational models are useful if they succeed in uncovering the true motives people have for gambling and can certainly be relevant for marketers.

Involvement Models. Involvement models help explain varying degrees of participation in gambling. Some of these models explain why one individual (and not another) develop problem gambling. The focus of these studies is on individual factors, i.e. biological and psychological [12]. Other involvement models attempt to explain why certain groups of people gamble more than others. Therefore, there is a focus on the social and cultural variables that apply on a group level.

These models, however, are of limited value to business because they do not consider market-oriented criteria such as why people may select one casino hotel over another (brand choice). Some good research has emerged on market-relevant issues such as risk perception and cognitive heuristics. Some of the more notable studies include regret theory [8], the risky shift [3], base-rate fallacy [10], subjective probability [4], availability bias [11], counterfactual thinking [9], prospect theory [7], and social learning theory [2].

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The analysis in this study is based on data from the 2008 and 2009 Market Metrix Hospitality Index (MMHI). The MMHI is a national indicator of customer satisfaction, emotions, loyalty, and price sensitivity regarding hospitality industry facilities and services available to consumers. The index is conducted on a quarterly basis on behalf of Market Metrix by Harris Interactive, one of the world’s leading custom market research firms. Since its inception in 2001, the MMHI has utilized Harris Interactive’s national research panel in order to evaluate participants’ recent experiences with hospitality products and services, as well as track details about their travel habits and their general demographic profile.

All MMHI respondents answer approximately 80 survey questions. Utilizing a proprietary ordinal scale, these questions measure participants’ customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, emotions related to each experience, price sensitivity and demographic characteristics. Over the course of its nine year existence, the questionnaire has been continually refined to reflect changing market conditions and evolving customer habits. In its modern form, it has been adapted to address current issues such as the growth of green programs and the emerging impact of social media.

Harris Interactive and Market Metrix maintain numerous quality assurance practices to ensure respondent and data integrity. The database of respondent information is actively screened and updated along numerous demographic and psychographic variables to allow precision in the online sample. The participant panel consists solely of individuals who have double opted-in and voluntarily agreed to participate in an online research study.

Sample

To gain specific insight into casino customers, MMHI data for all U.S. hospitality brands was filtered to include only those responses for customers of casino brands. Utilizing two full years of MMHI data (over 280,000 responses), the analysis filtered 21,901 submissions by members of the panel who reported on a recent casino stay. The data of those casino customers was then manipulated statistically through cluster modeling performed in SPSS software.

In order to load the cluster model, 11 of the approximately 80 MMHI questions were selected based on their high degree of descriptiveness of casino customer profiles and behavior (See Figure 1). To ensure fair analysis, the model used only those MMHI responses for casinos, where participants answered all 11 of the selected questions. This reduced the 21,901 MMHI casino responses to 4894 complete responses, representing the final sample size used for the modeling.

FIGURE 1: QUESTIONS USED IN CLUSTER ANALYSIS

Question number	Question description
1	Age
2	Annual income
3	Average daily rate paid for room during most recent stay
4	Estimated total overnight stays at a casinos each year
5	Satisfaction with casino ambiance
6	Satisfaction with friendliness of casino staff
7	Perceived odds of winning at the casino
8	Membership in casino loyalty program
9	Membership in casino loyalty program as an elite member
10	Perceived importance of loyalty program
11	Likelihood to return as repeat guest of the casino

Limitations

Although MMHI survey content and participants are modified each quarter in order to reflect relevant market conditions, results are still susceptible to the limitations of a sampling approach. While quarterly data yields results on approximately 280 U.S. brands on average, including all major casinos, not every existing brand is included, as some do not receive responses. To that end, since participation of customers of each brand is determined based on brand market share, there also exists the likelihood of greater volatility of data for the smaller of those brands which do receive data. Finally, it is worthy to emphasize that since it is generated through customer surveys, all data is self-reported by participants, rather than being observed in a field setting.

DATA ANALYSIS

The final sample of 4894 responses was put through numerous iterations of cluster analysis in order to separate the data into logical segments that were sufficiently differentiated from one another. The eventual output produced seven distinct segments (see Figure 2). In order to enrich the segment profiles, additional characteristics (e.g., demographics) were added to each segment based on the survey responses of persons within each group.

FIGURE 2: SIZE OF SEGMENTS

Segment	Total responses	Percent of Total Sample
1	1028	21.0
2	456	9.3
3	460	9.4
4	201	4.1
5	1613	33.0
6	587	12.0
7	549	11.2
Combined	4894	
Excluded Cases	17007	
Total	21901	

The seven segments were compared using the averages for the 11 cluster questions and demographic information. Based on the expanded profiles, well-defined differences emerged among the seven segments.

Defining characteristics of each segment have been summarized in Figure 3 below. These key characteristics were used to assign names to each segment. The segments are sorted according to the number of nights per year these persons spend in hotels. This measure is helpful to classify the desirability of each segment to casino brands.

FIGURE 3: CASINO CUSTOMER SEGMENT NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Segment	Description	Favorite brands	Share of industry	Nights per Year	
HIGH FREQUENCY	Mr. High Roller	High spenders, very frequent travelers with over 10 trips/year, non-members, fairly satisfied, predominantly male, very high income, travel on business and pleasure	Bellagio, Encore, Venetian, Wynn	4.1%	28.0
	Elder Elites	Elite loyalty members (take most trips among members), sufficiently satisfied, not optimistic, oldest, predominantly male, high income	Harrah's, Caesar's Palace, Trump, Bally's	11.2%	17.4
MEDIUM FREQUENCY	Unmoved Members	Regular loyalty members, lowest satisfaction among all members but inclined to recommend and return, take shorter trips	Tropicana, Orleans, Harrah's	33.0%	11.5
	True Blue	Regular loyalty members, highest satisfaction among members and most likely to recommend and return, would pay premium for room (sometimes comped)	Foxwoods, Mohegan Sun	11.9%	11.4
LOW FREQUENCY	Happy-go-lucky	Happy non-members, highly satisfied with service, optimistic about gambling, likely to recommend and return (and sometimes do take multiple trips) young, average income, would pay premium for room	Hard Rock, New York-New York	9.3%	9.1
	Ice Queens	Hard to please non-members, not satisfied with service, pessimistic about gambling, unsure about returning or recommending, young, predominantly female, average income, rely on reviews for selection	Circus Circus, Excalibur, Mandalay Bay, Imperial Palace	9.4%	8.9
	Accidental Travelers	Least frequent travelers, non members, fairly optimistic and satisfied, youngest, average income, say they may return but seldom seem to do so	Luxor, Excalibur, MGM Grand, Treasure Island, Palms	21.0%	7.5

Segment Descriptions

High Frequency Visitors

Mr. High Roller – This group comprised the smallest but potentially lucrative segment of the industry due to the number of nights per year they spend in hotels. Respondents were predominantly male with the highest income and highest level of spending across all segments. Not surprisingly, their favorite brands are upscale casinos like Bellagio, Encore, Venetian and Wynn. They take frequent trips, over 13 times a year on average, with a quarter of these being for business and the remainder for pleasure. For the most part, they do not care to participate in loyalty programs. Although not thrilled, these customers are generally satisfied with the products and services delivered at these brands.

Elder Elites – This group represents about 11 percent of the consumer market and includes predominantly members of elite loyalty programs. These persons take advantage of these programs with a high number of trips. They are mostly male and have a relatively high income, but are considerably older than average. The Elder Elites are very satisfied with casino service but not very optimistic about their perceived odds of winning, especially considering their loyalty and frequent visits. Their preferred brands include Harrah's, Caesar's Palace, Trump and Bally's.

Medium frequency visitors

Unmoved Members – The Unmoved Members comprise an entire third of all casino customers. They are loyalty club members who take a few trips per year but do not stand out very much in their behavior in contrast to other segments. They tend to take shorter weekend-length. Their income and spending are lower than other loyalty club members. They are more pessimistic about their odds of winning and less satisfied with casino service. Tropicana, Orleans and Harrah's are favorite destinations of The Unmoved Members.

True Blue – This segment, representing 12 percent of all casino customers, is another segment with mostly loyalty club members. When compared to the first two such segments (Elder Elites and Unmoved Members), these customers are the most satisfied and the most likely to recommend their casino choice to others. They are not members of the elite loyalty program. Perhaps because they are so satisfied with their experience, they are willing to pay a price premium for their casino of choice. Among their favorite brands are Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods.

Low Frequency

Happy-Go-Lucky – Accounting for nine percent of all casino guests, these customers tend to be younger with modest incomes that thoroughly enjoy their experience. They perceive their odds of winning as good and express a willingness to recommend the brand they selected. Although they are not loyalty program members, they are quite willing to return again. The number of nights per year these persons spend in hotels is the same as the Unmoved Members, who are loyalty members. Their brands of choice include Hard Rock and New York-New York, and are willing to pay a price premium to maintain their choice.

Ice Queens – This segment of infrequent casino visitors are generally pessimistic (about their odds of winning) and are consistently hard-to-please (as indicated by very low satisfaction scores). They are a small segment, representing only nine percent of casino customers. They are more often female (58%), relatively young, with average incomes. They do rely on user generated reviews to select their casino hotel destination. Although these customers often select Circus Circus, Excalibur, Mandalay Bay and Imperial Palace, they remain uncertain in their intent to return or recommend their choices to others.

Accidental Travelers – This group comprises about one fifth of all casino guests and includes those visitors who stay at casinos least often. They tend to be younger and of average income, reporting good satisfaction with their experience and feeling optimistic about their perceived odds of winning. Although they spend the fewest nights at casinos compared to other segments, they are reasonably inclined to return to their casino of choice in the future. Most frequently, they tend to select like Luxor, Excalibur, MGM Grand, Treasure Island and Palms.

FIGURE 4: CASINO SEGMENT DESIRABILITY

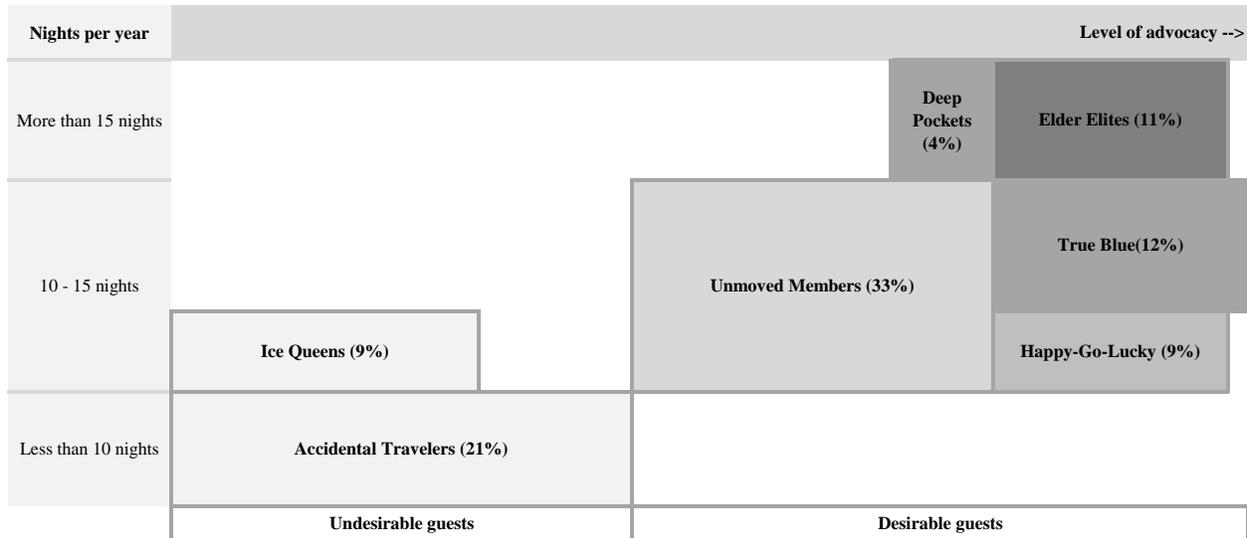


Figure 4 displays the segments in terms of their value (number of nights per year spent in hotels) and their level of advocacy (willingness to recommend to others). The numbers in parentheses represent the percentage of the population represented by each segment.

Differentiating Themes

Brand Preferences

Brand preferences identified in Figure 1 were derived once cluster analysis tagged individual responses as part of a specific segment. Since respondents identified the casino brand for their most recent stay, sum totals were collected per brand per segment. As a final step, these raw totals were weighted in order to accommodate for the different quantities of participants in each segment (Figure 2). These weighted totals allowed for the identification of the most frequently selected brands for each segment.

As Figure 3 shows, the preferred brands for many segments tend to be fairly predictable. For instance, the Mr. High Roller segment overwhelmingly prefers upscale casinos such as Bellagio, Encore and Wynn, while the younger, more positive and fun loving Happy-Go-Lucky segment, prefers brands like Hard Rock and New York-New York, specifically known for their entertainment. These often-predictable brand preferences can be considered an affirmation of the carefully selected methodology of the model.

Demographic Profiles of the Casino Customer

As with brand preferences, the mapping of individual survey responses to specific segments allowed for the calculation of demographic averages for each group. The demographic criteria available for segments were age, gender, income, travel on business, total nights for recent stay, total nights stayed for past year and room rate paid. While many of these averages were predictable based on segment profiles, some stand out and merit specific mention.

Age distribution earned Elder Elites their name, as this segment was made up of predominantly elite loyalty members and was notably older than all other groups. Also interesting with respect to age, was the fact that the three groups with the lowest frequency of trips, also ranked as the three youngest segments.

When looking at gender, three of the segments' averages were skewed towards one gender and therefore gender description was used to name them. These were Mr. Big Spender (70 percent male), Elder Elites (65 percent male) and Ice Queens (60 percent female).

Income averages were of particular interest, as nearly all segments reported relatively high five-figure incomes. The only exception was the Mr. High Roller cluster, showing a large spread from the rest with an income around \$175,000.

Examination of business vs. pleasure travel showed that no particular segment travels to casinos mainly for business events. The Mr. High Roller cluster came in highest with one out of every four trips being on business. The Ice Queens and Accidental Travelers also showed notable business trips (15%), thereby helping explain their low likelihood to return and dissatisfaction with experience, respectively, as they may not have planned their trips entirely voluntarily.

Annual room nights for each segment is the main demographic used to sort Figure 3. It is interesting to observe the exceptional frequency of travel for the Mr. High Roller segment, considering that the other three medium and high frequency segments are all loyalty club members and have predictably high frequency.

Finally, segments received calculations for the average rate paid per night. While loyalty club segments paid predictably less thanks to discounts, and low frequency segments paid more (standard daily rates), once again the Mr. High Roller group stood out among the pack as they averaged the highest rates paid by a notable margin. This is of interest considering they also have the highest frequency of visits but do not consider loyalty programs as important. This group is clearly less price sensitive.

Casino experience

Respondent data was available for a variety of casino experience questions. These allowed for comparisons of scores on overall experience, friendliness of staff, helpfulness of staff, casino ambiance, value of promotions, casino excitement, casino entertainment, and perceived odds of winning. Not surprisingly, scores for these questions were somewhat predictable across individual segments. The Happy-go-lucky and True Blue segments were particularly optimistic about odds and continually satisfied with service, while Ice Queens were unimpressed or dissatisfied in all areas and were exceptionally pessimistic about their odds of winning.

Impact of Loyalty programs

As mentioned previously, the three segments which include nearly all loyalty program members were Unmoved Members, True Blue and Elder Elites, with the last of these including the majority of elite program members. When asked a separate question on the importance of the loyalty program to them, Unmoved Members and True Blue gave an average response perceiving it as "somewhat important". The Elder Elites, however, saw their elite program membership as "very important" when selecting a casino. Furthermore, when contrasted against non-loyalty members and among each other, the three loyalty groups showed a range of interesting demographic and behavioral trends in the number of annual trips taken, room rates, etc, all of which are subjects for a deeper discussion that will be explored in a separate, follow-up study to this research.

Customer Emotions

With 16 of the over 80 MMHI questions relating to participants emotions, several showed notable differences among segments. Seven of the 16 questions were examined in depth across the segments. These were questions on feeling: welcome, pampered, inspired, excited, entertained, important and respected. The highest volatility among the segments was shown with the feeling of respected. Three of the seven segments indicated that they did not feel as respected by their host casino relative to what they originally expected. The Ice Queens scored lowest by a wide margin, while the Unmoved Members and Mr. High Rollers came in slightly below the medium. On the high end, the more positive Happy-go-lucky and True Blue segments reported feeling more respected as guests than what they originally anticipated.

In terms of results for the remaining emotions questions, Ice Queens continually did not achieve average “as expected” results for all six questions, though by a much smaller margin than on feeling respected. The Wannabes and Mr. High Rollers, however, consistently scored these emotions “as expected” while the Happy-go-lucky and True Blue constantly showed their expectations were exceeded.

The Role of Social Media and Reviews

Given that a growing percentage of casino customers rely on user-generated reviews when selecting where to gamble and stay, MMHI monitors the trend by including two relevant questions, asking all respondents whether they read user reviews when making their selection and whether they wrote a review following their stay. With regard to reading reviews, the averages across the seven segments are expectedly low for high frequency of visit segments and high for lower frequency visitors. The three loyalty club segments naturally have low interest in reading reviews as they tend to return to the same familiar brands. The Mr. High Roller segment also shows a lower comparative interest in reading reviews, likely due to the fact that they are the most frequent visitors and are already familiar with the upscale casino brands they prefer.

Conversely, all three low frequency segments show high reliance on reviews. Among both Ice Queens and the Happy-go-lucky, one out of every three respondents relies on reviews. This should not come as a surprise, as they are less frequent visitors who require more research, while their younger profile also makes them more likely to utilize social networking. The final segment showed slightly lower but still high reliance on reviews, with one out of four participants confirming to have used them in their casino selection process. The slightly lesser reliance here is likely due to the segment’s profile as Accidental Travelers, who do not place as high of an importance on casino vacation options compared to other segments.

The results for the question about if the guest wrote a review after their stay yielded somewhat different trends for the seven segments. The highest likelihood of writing reviews was found in the segments that showed optimism and higher brand loyalty, specifically the Happy-go-lucky, True Blue and Elder Elites. This shared characteristic is particularly interesting considering the already-mentioned variance in demographic characteristics across these three segments. While the Happy-Go-Lucky customer is largely stimulated by their general optimism and reported good experience, the two loyalty segments (True Blue and Elder Elites) can perhaps be better seen as disciples for their brand given their membership, frequent returns and satisfaction with their casino experience.

CONCLUSIONS

It is notable that frequency of trips to casinos is lowest for the three youngest segments. As these consumers age, will the frequency of trips increase and fall in line with the older demographics, or will this habit of less frequent visit persist into old age?

It is also interesting that there is no particular segment consisting of respondents traveling to casinos mainly or at least frequently for business events. This is largely due to the fact that all segments took multiple trips per year to casinos, with even the lowest frequency segment’s members showing about seven overnight stays per year, taken in multiple trips.

A significant finding is that for potentially very lucrative segments, loyalty and the willingness to pay a price premium are not always highly correlated with participation in loyalty programs or high visit frequencies. The Happy-go-lucky segment serves as the best evidence of this observation, since its members reported some of the highest satisfaction scores and a willingness to return and recommend their selected brand, without having already built a connection to the property or brand through frequent visits or the perks of a loyalty program. Within the three loyalty club segments, the True Blues show a similar trend, as they report highest satisfaction and intent to recommend of all three, without being elite members or taking the most trips.

Implications for Researchers

The internet and social media have made available unprecedented amounts of data on consumer behavior and attitudes at relatively low cost. This data should drive a resurgence of research into drivers of consumer motivation and attitudes and the economic value of customer loyalty that are relevant to both researchers and gaming operators.

One of the fundamental questions in need of research is: Does the next generation represent a deep, fundamental shift in behaviors and attitudes? Younger people gamble less. Will that change as they get older or has technology and the availability of so much information and entertainment alternatives changed them permanently and changed our culture? The answer could give empirical insight into how technology changes culture.

Implications for Gaming Operators

Such a generational shift could also create major problems for traditional gaming operators as they struggle to connect with new generational values and modes of entertainment and communication.

Our research indicates several other challenges for gaming operators. First, they need to better understand, in a systematic way, their current and potential customers in order to compete in what could be a permanently more hostile world of increased entertainment alternatives, declining population of potential customers, and higher cost of capital.

Gaming operators may be overly focused on their loyalty program members. They may need to think more broadly about how to drive loyalty and brand advocacy. Traditional loyalty programs may not appeal to some lucrative segments, such as the Mr. High Rollers. Nurturing vocal advocates, even if they don't visit frequently or sign up for the players club could be valuable in the age of TripAdvisor.

Technology should also allow operators to cost-effectively personalize the gaming experience in the future. This will only be possible if the operator gathers the relevant information from its customers and thoughtfully segments customers in ways that lead to important differences in marketing and product and service delivery.

AUTHOR'S PROFILES

Jonathan Barsky has been a professor at University of San Francisco since 1985. Since he began at USF, Jonathan has brought his expertise in customer satisfaction to the School of Business and Professional Studies. He has conducted extensive research on how to measure customer satisfaction and the determining factors that influence customer satisfaction, with a focus in the hotel industry. He has published 100 + articles in various journals and trade publications as well as two books, including his first book World- Class Customer Satisfaction, now going into its 13th year of publication.

Todor Tzolov is an Account Manager at Market Metrix, based in San Rafael, CA, where he works with numerous casino brands across North America. His interests include the importance of employee engagement and the effective management of social media. Todor is a graduate of Georgetown University.

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