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COMMON GROUND / Paul Blossom

Momentum builds for standards

Recently, Tim Stanley, chief information officer of Harrah's; Tom Peck, senior vice president and chief information officer of MGM Mirage; and Bob Sobczyk, vice president of slot operations, Ameristar Casinos, talked with us about the importance of involvement with the Gaming Standards Association. Here are some of their views on the benefits they expect for their organizations and for the industry.

■ Strong reasons to join

All three executives agreed that there are compelling reasons for their organizations to become GSA members. "The most compelling aspect of the GSA is the dialogue between operators, manufacturers and vendors," Stanley said. "That didn't exist before the GSA was formed. These discussions have identified various business needs that were then addressed through the standards-making process. Since everyone has an equal voice, concerns and ideas from all sides of an issue are heard and considered, making the solutions much better."

Peck said a key aspect of membership in GSA is "the ability, as part of a group, to drive innovation for the whole industry."

"The group can influence market trends and industry responses to those market trends. In the past, vendors and operators were focused on the tactical day-to-day operations and maintenance activities," he said. "The GSA group dialogues have moved the focus to market-based innovation and how to design the infrastructure to support innovation."

Sobczyk stated that "Ameristar is working with the GSA because we wanted to be involved throughout the development process and be part of the solution, rather than just be presented with an end result. We foresee that the GSA will be vital in creating an open architecture, allowing us to maximize the benefits from products offered by a diverse group of manufacturers."

All GSA members benefit from being associated with an organization with a common goal. Once standards are in place, the costs associated with manufacturing gaming equipment will

decrease across the industry. Once these standards are created and implemented in gaming equipment and software, installation in casinos will be simplified and streamlined. And once these standards are in place, more engineering time can be devoted to the design of new products, offering operators a greater selection of games and additional customer-oriented functionality.

■ The GSA membership difference

The executives stressed that participation is just as important as membership and that both have important benefits for their company as well as the industry. "Membership and participation in the GSA have given the MGM Mirage a voice in how the products we purchase for the gaming floor are designed and built. Because of our need for innovation we are early adopters of new technology. This means that we need to take an active role in the design of new products, so that they will be compatible with our systems. We are currently adding staff to accomplish these objectives," Peck said.

Sobczyk indicated that the need for integrated systems in the casino industry is stronger than ever. "Especially with the advancement of server-based gaming, it's essential for all gaming devices and systems to be on an open architecture. GSA facilitates stable and continuing communications with manufacturers on a frequent, real-time basis. GSA enables the integration of existing technologies and provides the platform for emerging applications. We believe GSA standards will result in streamlined operations, increased efficiencies and cost-effective solutions throughout the industry."

Stanley noted that participation in the GSA benefits Harrah's and the entire industry in several ways. "First and foremost, interoperability of games, systems, infrastructure and architecture will have huge benefits for the operator, simplifying operations and making more and better data available. Second, real standards give manufacturers and operators more options to interface products. Third, real standards allow manufacturers and operators to move the resources from developing and maintain multiple interfaces to creating new products and innovations. Fourth, the mar-

ket is getting increasingly global and is going through a period of consolidation. Common standards allow us to meet those challenges more easily and more quickly."

Peck agrees that standards and interoperability are necessary in the current business environment. "There are many benefits of the GSA standards. The three most important to me are: First, it gives us much better visibility into game, peripheral and customer data. Second, it increases our profitability through ease of interfacing and quicker deployment of games. And third, the standards protect our investment in the games by allowing them to freely pass data between the games and the infrastructure for accounting and our loyalty systems."

■ Why smaller organizations can benefit too.

Both Peck and Stanley said smaller organizations had much to gain from GSA participation. "Philosophically, GSA participation helps small operators more than large ones through the ability to be heard at the discussions" Stanley noted.

Peck stated that "MGM has scale and vendor leverage. Small operators need a venue to be heard. The GSA provides that."

All three men made a compelling case for the need for standards, the benefits of participation in GSA and the effectiveness of the dialogue among the GSA members and affiliates. For more information, visit www.gamingstandards.com.
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