

New century CRM gets a boost from Harrah's and Boyd

Special to IGWB

A couple of industry heavyweights have seen the future of relationship marketing, and they're putting down some early money on the belief that a lot of it is going to play out in cyberspace.

Boyd Gaming, a leading operator of locals casinos in Las Vegas and the U.S. drive-up markets, has launched a nationwide customer loyalty program on the Web in the form of an innovative interface called B Connected Online that lets players club members check point balances, stay abreast of special offers and monitor their progress up the rewards-tier ladder.

The site's watchwords are ease and convenience, exactly what the consumer expects. But B Connected Online is more than that. Sign up for free as a B Connected member (www.bconnectedonline.com) and you get a personalized home page with customized real-time calendars that provide a snapshot of all the events, entertainment, promotions and offers at any Boyd property on any day. Features include a navigation tool called Slot Search — this lets you pore over the slot menu of any Boyd casino and then gives you the specific location of the game on the floor — an application that sounds an alert whenever a new offer or promotion is sent to your account, and a mirror site, BCO Mobile, accessible at mobile. bconnectedonline.com, optimized for use on mobile phones. There are also webcams offering live video feeds from five Boyd casinos in Las Vegas, soon to be extended to company properties nationwide.

It's all about "an exceptional customer experience," says COO Paul Chakmak.

"B Connected Online brings that philosophy to the Web. Our goal was to develop cutting-edge tools that make it easier than ever for customers to enjoy the benefits of membership."

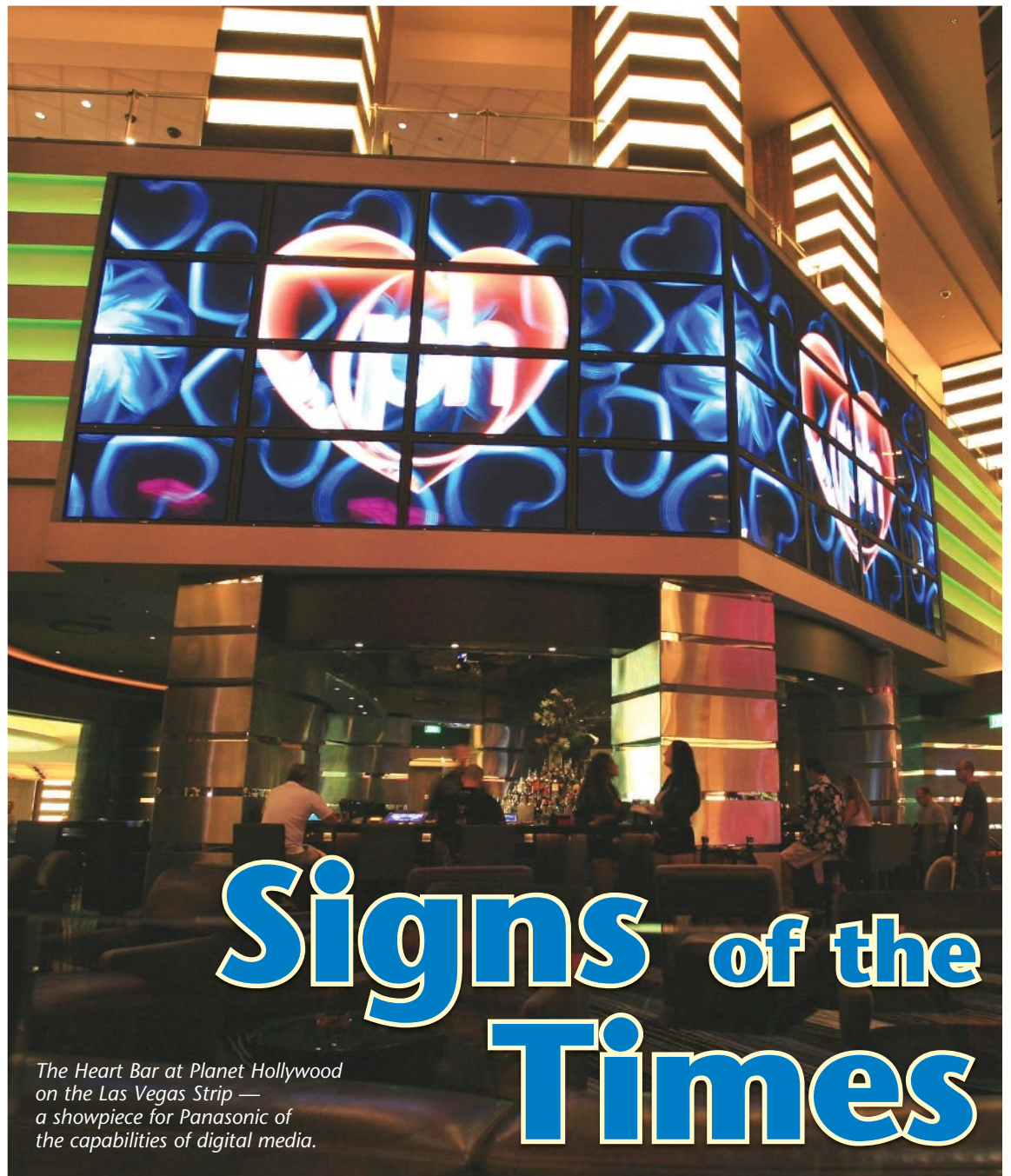
Meanwhile, just west of the Las Vegas Strip the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino is experimenting with text message alerts that apprise hotel guests in real time of deals on food, drinks and discounted show tickets available to them during their stay.

Katrina Lane, VP of channel marketing for casino giant Harrah's Entertainment, the Rio's owner, said the company is trying to find a more direct way to communicate with customers and strengthen the property's relationship with them.

The service is available only to guests who specifically opt in, and it runs only four days, the typical length of a Rio stay, although it includes an application customers can download if they want to continue to receive messages beyond that time. The platform is run by Acxiom Corp. and Acuity Mobile.

More than 3,000 customers have signed up to date, and Harrah's is looking at extending the service to the Strip, starting at the Flamingo. But Lane emphasizes that it is still very much a pilot program.

"We want to be sure this is the right technology that we want to use across the company," she said. "We want to be sure this is something the customer wants." **igwb**



The Heart Bar at Planet Hollywood on the Las Vegas Strip — a showpiece for Panasonic of the capabilities of digital media.

Signs of the Times

Dazzling with digital is all about the excitement, the awareness ... oh, yeah, and the revenues

BY CRAIG BEROSH

J.M. Allain is confident casino patrons will be energized by the thousands of digital signs his company has installed at Planet Hollywood on the Las Vegas Strip. The president of Panasonic System Solutions also knows the important role digital signage plays for operators depending on the latest technologies as a profit center.

Allain's response to what "digital" means to today's casino operators — "The ability to include multiple content forms means increased promotion and visi-

bility of the venue's events, restaurants and accommodations. In addition, the advertising revenue opportunity is virtually unlimited. Digital signage offers incremental ROI."

Even in the glitzy world of digital signage, Panasonic's deployment at Planet Hollywood this past November is an impressive example of the latest technologies. The property's exterior includes a curved LED large-screen system 57 feet high and a 180-foot pylon with back-to-back LED boards mea-

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FROM THE ONLINE ARCHIVE: Read more about air filtering technologies in the February issue.

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Paltronics' innovative 3-D Way Finding feature, usually displayed on touch-screen kiosks, is finding acceptance in the marketplace, especially at larger properties.

asuring 40 feet wide and 30 feet high. Two additional curved LEDs adorn the face of the casino along with a curved ribbon display that measures approximately 600 feet in length. Inside, the gaming floor is outfitted with 200 plasma displays used to promote the casino, shows and events, clubs and restaurants. The property's Heart Bar features 32 Panasonic 65-inch plasma displays arranged in two video walls for showing sporting events and hotel promotions. In the front lobby, 15 plasma displays deliver promotional programming. These include six interactive kiosks with touch-screen technology to highlight hotel amenities and provide directions. In the hotel elevators, ceiling-mounted plasmas display promotional messaging. The messaging is controlled by Panasonic's NMstage content management software.

"[Planet Hollywood's] owners wanted to create a visually stimulating environment that included live video broadcast to screens all across the venue," Allain explained.

If the purpose of a sign is to be seen, the ultimate goal of digital signage in today's gaming environment has moved far beyond that to include everything from directions to celebrations to promotions. The difference is on par with the chasm between standard-definition and the high-definition technology that is becoming prevalent with new installations across the industry.

"We see the area of digital signage growing fast as both a networked communications technology and a medium of interactive experience," Allain said. "The objective is to excite customers,

engage them and bring them more into the story. For the casino or hotel the goal is to capture their interest in all the different opportunities offered by the venue, including restaurants, shows, promotions, etc. A successful installation will help to draw customers and increase traffic to the places being promoted."

Generally speaking, says Nick Hogan, vice president of sales and business development for Netherlands-based Gaming Support, operators approach digital signage initiatives with "hard" and "soft" goals. On the soft side, he says, operators want to see an improvement in client perceptions of value. So customers should feel better informed about products and services and believe they're receiving superior "bang per buck". They should even feel "luckier," he says.

"On the hard side, they're looking for revenue increases — pure and simple," he added. "Although this does stretch beyond the casino floor, they're most concerned with gaming outlays. In measuring this, it typically comes down to utilization, average duration of play and, of course, gross wager."

Said Nat Holt, director of sales for New Jersey-based AC Coin & Slot, "At the end of the day, it's about keeping people in your casino a little bit longer than your competitor to drive that revenue."

CREATING 'ATMOSPHERE'

Gaming Support's JackpotJunction product line consists of three individual application sets. JackpotJunction Lite is marketed predominantly to slot machine manufacturers and is concerned with bank-level promotion. JackpotJunction Pro generally is marketed to stand-alone venues seeking to cross-promote their various gaming and non-gaming businesses on a single signage platform. JackpotJunction XL is marketed to large gaming enterprises requiring cross-property integration and collaborative content management utilities that facilitate use by hundreds of employees.

Gaming Support has installed gaming-enabled digital signage solutions at

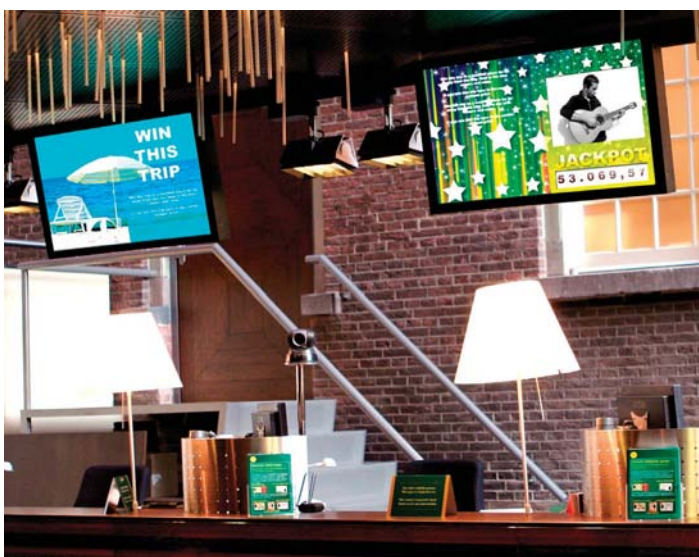
properties operated by Holland Casino in the Netherlands, at Harrah's St. Louis and Mount Airy Casino Resort in Pennsylvania. The company's current project with Melco Crown's City of Dreams in Macau is taking "almost every application that we have on offer," says Hogan. "We'll be incorporating every jackpot and bonusing event on the floor — stand-alone and linked. It's an ambitious project in every respect."

In a sea of digital audio and video stimuli, one unique aspect of AC Coin & Slot's offering in the signage market, which includes hybrid slot bases and LED lighting solutions, isn't particularly "digital" at all. The company specializes in high-end custom signage that Holt says has a high impact on branding a unique casino experience that touches a player's senses. AC Coin & Slot's "older artisan-type technology," as Holt words it, is best represented by the company's hand-blown glass designs, which might be employed to accent an LCD atop a bank of slot progressives or to welcome patrons at a buffet entrance. Most all the hand work with plastics, glass, resins and paint is done in-house.

"Everybody wants to have their own individual gaming environment, not wanting to copy off somebody using similar materials or similar colors or themes," Holt said. "We really try to get involved at the design and architectural level with the customer to be able to develop the vision they want to see on their gaming floor using different types of technology and things that you can see, feel, touch that create an atmosphere."

Two recent projects showcasing AC Coin's ability, and flexibility, when it comes to capturing a property's vision include the outfitting of the Snoqualmie Casino, which opened outside Seattle in November with 20 custom signs, and the installation of 71 custom-designed signs at the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem set to open next month in eastern Pennsylvania.

"For the Snoqualmie it was very important to them to utilize their logo in the theme," Holt explained. "We used LED technology in the end panels of the slot



The technology behind Gaming Support's JackpotJunction XL digital signage solution is designed for use by large numbers of employees property-wide.

bases so we are able to back-light the logo of the tribe; very traditional, very rooted in their tribal ancestry. Sands was total cutting-edge and progressive — metalwork, rich earth tones — bringing out the steel town feeling without it feeling like you are in a steel mill. Keeping in touch with the roots, culture and history and then housing that in a gaming environment is very important politically, socially and has economic benefit as well."

THE 'FRAGMENTATION' PROBLEM

The obvious benefit of going "digital" is the striking improvement in visual quality. Everything looks crisper, sharper. But the advantages of Digital Age technology only begin there. Newer screens are now designed to "battle the elements," as explained by Panasonic's Allain, including sunlight, dust and other outdoor factors. The screens themselves also offer much more variety in configuration. Rather than plain, flat rectangles, for example, curved boards and cutting-edge flexible mesh LEDs can take any shape.

"There are also more opportunities for creative, dynamic content and delivery," Allain said. "Increasingly high-definition images and video are far more engaging and interesting than simple static images or standard definition. With networked control, content changes can be made at any time and can be reactive to what's happening in the facility or in the world."

The providers of the systems that deliver the digital media — essentially what pushes the pictures, animation and streaming video and audio to be displayed around the casino — focus much of their efforts on simplifying the process for operators.

"What I see in the marketplace today is a lot of fragmented content delivery," said Todd Sims, vice president of systems operations at Bally Technologies. "The big desire of casino operators is to have one location to manage all their media throughout the entire property. Basically, one place to go to create, distribute, schedule and organize that content."

To address this, Bally recently invested further into the business of delivering digital media when the slot giant bought the gaming industry rights to CoolSign in November 2008. (CoolSign has since been acquired by CS Software Holdings, which purchased the application rights of the proprietary technology in all markets except gaming.)

Sims gives the example of casino operators who might have one system that drives the jumbotron out front of a property, another that drives the information in their convention center and yet another for progressives. CoolSign is Bally's answer to integrating a property's "fragmented" digital

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media and sending it to all the casino's plasmas, LCDs, in-room televisions room and so on. Perhaps most important, CoolSign supports Bally's iView Display Manager technology, which at its core is another outlet for displaying digital media. iView, however, sits on the screens of gaming devices to deliver messages while players are in action.

"With iView in a 2,000-game casino, for example, you are talking an extra 2,000 digital displays where you have a customer's direct attention," Sims said.

He says that with thousands of iViews currently in the marketplace, and with CoolSign being a "very new product for us," the surface is just being scratched when it comes to the capabilities of CoolSign when integrated with iView and other slot and casino management systems. And when content is able to be delivered directly to the screen of a slot machine, increased "time on device" becomes reality.

"Maybe [a patron] shows up to your casino resort early and their room wasn't ready," Sims gives as an example. "Well, the concierge takes their luggage and invites them to go out on the floor to start their gaming experience. So you're sitting at your machine, and an hour later information pops up on the iView that says your room is

ready, or maybe a restaurant reservation is ready."

TOWARD A SINGLE SYSTEM

With its One Link system Chicago-area-based Paltronic is also tackling the challenge that fragmented media content presents. One Link, as defined by Director of Media Development John Pebler, is an enterprise system that allows a property to manage all gaming and non-gaming patron interactions from a central location.

"This not only includes displays but also slot systems and table systems — allowing you to truly link everything together as one," he said.

One Link allows users to set up "channels" onto a media system. These channels, which can be thought of like television channels, are sets of instructions that tell the display what to do. The channel can be on one display or all the displays in a casino. The channel might be programmed to play five marketing messages and then play live television for 20 minutes and then display progressive jackpot information. Each media player is hooked up to an individual plasma TV, LCD, kiosk or whatever the display device.

"It can really do whatever you tell it," Pebler said.

Paltronic has had several clients go

exclusively high-definition for their installs, among them the newly opened Red Hawk Casino in Northern California, where the company installed 450 of its HD media players.

Controlling the actual content can be done by the casino or by Paltronic but is often a collaborative effort. Paltronic has the capability to gain remote access to any of the systems, tying

in using the Internet and taking control of any display on the floor. Aside from progressive displays, which Pebler says are still the most demanded content by operators, and marketing and promotional materials, Paltronic's systems offer advanced interactivity. The company's Way Finding feature, which provides CAD drawings of the casino floor layout and turns it into a 3-D animation to be displayed on touch-screen kiosks, has found great acceptance, especially at larger properties.

"We try to go in and sit down with a property, especially a property that is



With the acquisition of CoolSign, Bally has enhanced the ability of its iView technology to deliver media directly to gaming devices.

just opening up, to get a feel for the message that they are trying to put across to their patrons," Pebler said. "Every place is different; some places, if they have 40 pieces of content, they try to put 40 pieces of content on every sign. The most important thing is that we can allow them to do all that from one location with one system." igwb

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