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Building Customer Loyalty with Millennials in the Gaming Entertainment Industry

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BUILDING CUSTOMER LOYALTY WITH MILLENNIALS IN THE GAMING
ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

by

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Abstract

This paper discusses how to build customer loyalty between Millennials and casinos. Although research has indicated that casinos are losing the interest of the Millennial consumer, it is recommended that casinos do not give up on this demographic. The Millennial generation is massive, accounting for a fourth of the U.S. population. Entering the workforce at rapid speed, this generation has a large amount of spending power and is willing to pay more for a product that is deemed valuable. This paper intends to lay the groundwork for an exploratory research study on customer loyalty and Millennials in the gambling and entertainment industry. The research objective focuses on the core components of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty, the consumer behavior of Millennials, and their gambling preferences compared to other generations. The research explored in this paper reveals that Millennials gamble differently than older generations, and casinos have opportunities to build customer loyalty with this younger generation. This paper formulates a marketing plan for hotel marketers that identifies trends in the market, defines a casino's objectives and the strategies to employ them, and the specific action plans to carry out those strategies. Additional recommendations are presented to assist casinos in building customer loyalty with the Millennial demographic.

Keywords: customer loyalty, rewards program, Millennials, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Gen Xers, casinos, gambling, behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, brand trust, brand affect, brand quality

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Chapter One Introduction

Iconic businessman Walt Disney once said, “do what you do so well that they want to see it again and bring their friends” (Screurs, n.d.). A brand that can build customer loyalty with consumers has a competitive advantage over other brands in the same sector. Anderson & Jacosen (2019) define customer loyalty as “the creation of a company that provides benefits to customers so that customers continue to establish sustainable relationships with the company” (Soedarto, Kurniawan, and Sunarsono, 2019). Building customer loyalty in the casino industry can be challenging due to neighboring casinos offering competitive pricing and similar amenities. Casinos that feature non-gaming amenities such as retail shopping, restaurants, and entertainment venues provide additional opportunities to build customer loyalty. Although casinos feature recreational activities that some hotels do not, these activities do not guarantee customer loyalty or higher profits.

To build customer loyalty in the hospitality industry, casinos need to focus on attracting Millennial customers. Born between 1980 and 1996, Millennials are the largest generation, “accounting for 77.5 million adults and representing one-fourth of the population” (Horton, 2021). This is a generation casino brands cannot ignore for their size alone. As a consumer group, this demographic is just starting to flex its spending power. Casinos can start building customer loyalty by understanding three concepts about this group. Millennials are looking for brands that offer “convenience, simplicity, and instant benefits...” (Smith, 2020). Millennials expect brands to provide an experience. Millennials actually “are the only generation to value spending on experiences more than physical products” (Horton, 2021).

One way that brands build loyalty is through loyalty programs. A loyalty program is a customer reward or benefit program offered to "encourage continued patronage and frequent

purchases” (O’Donnell, 2021). According to research, “consumers, on the whole, are rather apathetic about most current loyalty programs, signaling an opportunity to improve these offerings.” (O’Donnell, 2021). The most successful loyalty programs offer a mix of “monetary and experiential rewards, use valuable customer data effectively to boost personalization and offer a seamless digital experience” (O’Donnell, 2021).

The Problem

Online travel agencies (OTAs) have made it easier for customers to price and book rooms for a casino hotel without feeling obligated to stay loyal to a specific brand. “Consumers have virtually unlimited brand choices at their fingertips, making it more difficult for brands to lock down their loyalty than ever before” (New Study By, 2019). The hotel industry is still suffering amid the pandemic, with “48% of adults uncomfortable staying in a hotel” (Smith, 2020). Casinos need to discover ways to build customer loyalty to gain a competitive advantage over their neighboring competitors.

Purpose Statement

This paper provides recommendations to the casino industry to build customer loyalty with the Millennial generation. Along with building customer loyalty in casinos, these recommendations may increase loyalty to hotels in the hospitality industry. Based on the literature review and its implications, this paper provides marketing strategies that will resonate with the Millennial demographic and assist with establishing customer loyalty to casinos in the future. The findings in this paper should prompt future research on Millennials' spending power, consumer habits, and loyalties to casinos. As more information becomes available on Millennials and gambling, this research can serve industry leaders with solid recommendations and best practices to attract this demographic.

Conceptual Framework

Loyalty comes in many forms, mainly attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Soedarto et al. (2019) stated that “attitudinal loyalty positively affects behavior loyalty, so the more positive the consumer attitude towards a brand, the stronger behavior loyalty.” When customers feel confident that their chosen brand can fulfill their needs and wants, positive feelings are created, and loyalty is established. This paper uses the theory of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty as a guiding framework.

The four databases utilized for research were: ABI/INFORM Collection, Mintel Market Research Database, Hospitality & Tourism Complete, & Sage Journals Online. The keywords used during the study were millennials, customer loyalty, loyalty programs, hotel reward programs, hotel loyalty programs, and casino loyalty. The literature review primarily focused on brands in general. Casino hotel data was more difficult to collect due to hotels, in general, having more findings.

Limitations

There were limitations associated with this research. Limited research was found on the average time Millennials spent gambling in a casino. Also, most of the research found on Millennials, and their consumer behavior was generally towards brands. Study findings were also limited on Millennials’ expectations and desired values from a casino.

Delimitations

This paper will focus on Millennials' customer loyalty within casinos in the United States.

Definition of Terms

Casinos: These establishments primarily provide short-term lodging and features “table wagering games and may include other gambling activities, such as slot machines and sports betting” (Gallinari, 2021). These establishments generally feature other amenities such as a spa, restaurant, entertainment, retail shopping, and conference and convention facilities.

Millennials: Horton (2021) defines this demographic as “the generation born between 1980 and 1996”. In 2021, members of the Millennial generation will be between 25 and 41. This generation’s subgroups are defined as the following:

- Younger Millennials: those born between 1989 and 1996, who are aged 25-32
- Older Millennials: those born between 1980 and 1988, who are aged 33-41

Generation X: This generation was born between 1965 and 1979 and is between “the ages of 42 and 56” (O’Donnell, 2021).

Gen Xers: This is a shortened word for the Generation X generation.

Baby Boomers: This generation was born between 1946 and 1964 and is between “the ages of 57 and 75” (O’Donnell, 2021).

Silent Generation: This generation is the oldest of all the current generations, born between 1925 and 1945 (Suh et al., 2017).

Customer loyalty: This is defined as the measure of a customer’s likeliness to do repeat business with a business or brand.

Loyalty program: Smith (2020) defines this as a customer’s reward offered by a brand to “encourage continued patronage and frequent purchases.” Rewards in loyalty programs come in the form of “points, discounts, special offers, rebates or other prizes” (Smith, 2020).

Brand trust: Brand trust is the “factor that makes an average user believe that the brand will perform its stated purpose whatsoever” (Soedarto et al., 2019).

Brand affect: In this study, this is a “consumers’ overall favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the brand” (Soedarto et al., 2019).

Brand quality: This is the “moment at which the consumer receives information or cues about the characteristics of the product while shopping for or consuming it” (Soedarto et al., 2019).

Attitudinal loyalty: This is the “consumer’s predisposition towards the brand as a function of psychological processes, which includes the attitudinal preference and commitment to the brand” (Soedarto et al., 2019).

Behavioral loyalty: This is the form of customer loyalty that results in the repetition of purchasing behavior.

Digital Advertising: This consists of internet-delivered ads in paid search advertising, digital video ads, display advertising, and other forms of digital advertising such as audio streaming and lead generation services.

Online gambling: Also known as internet gambling, it is any form of gambling conducted on the internet, such as virtual poker or online sports betting via a mobile app.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Soedarto et al. (2019) defined customer loyalty as “the creation of a company that provides benefits to customers so that customers continue to establish sustainable relationships with the company.” The Millennial demographic is the “largest generation in the U.S.” (Horton, 2021). With the size of this generation comes an incredible amount of spending power. Due to their size and potential of spending power, it is recommended that casinos increase their

customer loyalty with this demographic. To build customer loyalty with Millennials, hotel marketers must first learn the consumer habits of this generation. Next, casinos should evaluate their existing reward programs to see if improvements are necessary to remain attractive to guests. Consumers want loyalty programs to be “easy to sign up for, access, and manage via their channel of choice” (Smith, 2020).

The Stages of Customer Loyalty

The hospitality industry does recognize the importance of customer loyalty “largely due to its contribution to profitability...” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). To better understand how to increase customer loyalty, a casino operator must first truly understand the components of loyalty. A prime indication of loyalty is the measurement of “consistent, repetitious purchase behavior” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). However, this repetitious behavior does not always result in a psychological commitment to a brand. For example, a customer may stay at a hotel because it is convenient for them to sleep there or offers a discount at that moment, not because they are loyal to the brand.

Bowen & McCain (2015) stated that customer loyalty has four phases (cognitive, affective, intention to return, & action). Customer loyalty is developed through a “progression process,” and “consumers can become loyal at each attitudinal stage” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). The first phase is *cognitive loyalty*, where consumers “prefer one brand over another based only on brand belief” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). The second phase is *affective loyalty*. In this phase, “liking the product and a positive attitude towards the brand has developed, based on continuous satisfying experiences” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). However, this phase does not guarantee a repeat purchase by a customer as “research has shown that sometimes satisfied customers do not return” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). Next, the *intention to return* phase has formed. When

customers' intention to return transforms into the "readiness to act, they are in the *action* loyalty stage" (Bowen & McCain, 2015). In this last phase, a "brand-specific commitment to repurchase" is created (Bowen & McCain, 2015).

Antecedents of Customer Loyalty

It is important to learn how a customer perceives a brand. Multiple variables affect customer loyalty. Figure 1 showcases the variables, brand affect, brand trust, brand quality, behavioral and attitudinal loyalty, as evidenced on the next page. Brand affect correlates to human feelings a consumer can feel towards a brand. These human feelings that appear can be "joy, happy, sad, angry, upset, impressed" when interacting with a brand (Soedarto et al., 2019). In this paper, brand affect is a customer's overall positive or negative evaluation of the brand. Casino brands that make the customer happy or joyful could "cause a stronger attitudinal commitment and purchase loyalty" (Soedarto et al., 2019). A casino's goal is to elicit a positive emotional response from a guest due to its interaction with the brand.

Consumers with brand trust believe that the brand will perform its stated purpose without risk. For example, a guest who walks into a casino expects the slot machines are turned on when they sit down in front of one on the casino floor. This belief or trust in a brand is the understanding that it is capable of "delivering the performance as promised" (Soedarto et al., 2019). Per Soedarto et al. (2019), brand trust is critical as it "shows that the relationship between a consumer and a brand can go beyond satisfaction." It is these researchers' opinion that brand trust is the basis in "establishing relationships between consumers and brands for a continuous relationship" (Soedarto et al., 2019). Consumer loyalty and brand relationships will become evident if the "consumer has the belief that the brand can show the best performance and can meet the expectations of the consumer" (Soedarto et al., 2019).

Brand quality is considered “one of the crucial factors for the brand” (Soedarto et al., 2019). It is the “moment at which the consumer receives information or cues about the characteristics of the product while shopping for or consuming it” (Soedarto et al., 2019). Research has found that brand quality can affect brand loyalty positively. (Soedarto et al., 2019). When designing a product, brand quality is “one of the crucial factors for the seller to design [a] product” (Soedarto et al., 2019).

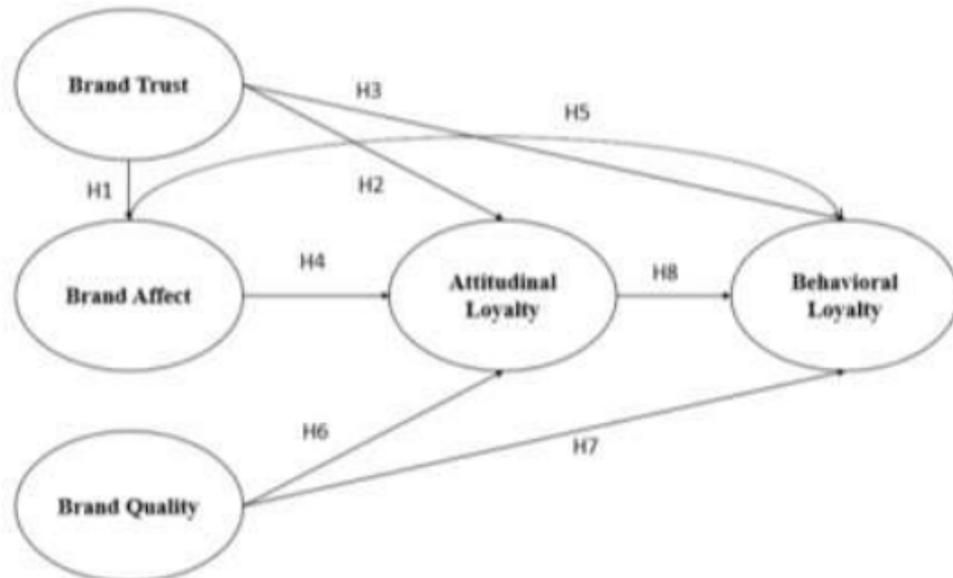
Two important antecedents of loyalty are attitudinal and behavioral loyalty due to their influence on customer loyalty and repeat purchase behavior. Attitudinal loyalty is defined as “loyalty to a brand based on psychological commitment” (Soedarto et al., 2019). Behavioral loyalty is consumer behavior based on “purchasing decisions and the intention of doing repeat purchase” (Soedarto et al., 2019). Research has found that these two antecedents are related. “Attitudinal loyalty positively affects behavior loyalty”; therefore, the more positive a customer’s attitude towards a brand, the “stronger behavior loyalty” (Soedarto et al., 2019). Soedarto et al. (2019) stated that “behavioral loyalty is the result of attitudinal loyalty.”

There are disagreements about behavioral and attitudinal loyalty being indicators of each other. While some researchers believe repeat purchases are indicators of ways to observe customer loyalty, researchers like Sharp et al. feel differently. They argue that “attitude is irrelevant to serve as a determinant of brand loyalty” and state that attitudinal loyalty is more “difficult to observe” (Soedarto et al., 2019). Researchers in favor of the relationship between these two variables stated that when a customer trusts a brand, these feelings generate “loyalty in the attitude form” and “loyalty in the behavioral form” (Soedarto et al., 2019). Brands anticipate that consumers' purchasing behavior becomes repetitive, thus establishing loyalty.

Figure 1

Research model of the relationship between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

H₈: Attitudinal loyalty is positively related to behavioral loyalty.



Note. Soedarto et al. conducted a quantitative research approach to test the relationship between the variables; brand trust, brand affect, brand quality, attitudinal loyalty, and behavioral loyalty. Hypotheses in the study stated that brand trust, affect, and quality positively affect attitudinal loyalty and that attitudinal loyalty is positively related to behavioral loyalty. From “The Parceling of Loyalty: Brand Quality, Brand Affect, and Brand Trust Effect on Attitudinal Loyalty and Behavioral Loyalty” by T. Soedarto, G. S. A. Kurniawan, & R. J. Sunarsono, 2019, *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, 18(1), 1-15.

<http://ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/parceling-loyalty-brand-quality-affect-trust/docview/2195780157/se-2?accountid=3611>

Once a consumer trusts that a brand will perform without risk (brand trust), develops a happy feeling about a brand (brand affect), and believes the brand is a quality product/service (brand quality), they form a favorable perception and emotion to it (attitudinal loyalty). Lastly,

behavioral loyalty develops when the “real actions of the customer such as repurchase and positive word of mouth” are formed (Akbari, Nazarian, Foroudi, Nader, & Ezatabadipoor, 2021).

Benefits of Building Customer Loyalty

There are three significant benefits to building customer loyalty among Millennials, their size, fast growth, and spending power. Millennials are the largest generation in the United States, “making up 23.2% of the population” (Horton, 2021). As Millennials become more established in their careers, their income will increase. This generation is just starting to “flex their spending power, which will grow significantly in the coming years” (Kern, 2016). Bowen & McCain (2015) state that there is “a shift in the importance of generational trends, with Millennials trending and Baby Boomers fading” (Bowen & McCain, 2015). With the importance of trends leaning more toward the younger generation, it would make sense for casino operators to pay more attention to this demographic.

Millennials’ level of interest in gambling has increased attention in the gambling industry. “The Millennial generation is known to be more involved in online gambling than any other generation” (Suh, 2017). They also like playing “interactive and skill-based table games” like poker and blackjack. (Suh, 2017). This information proves that this generation still has an interest in casinos.

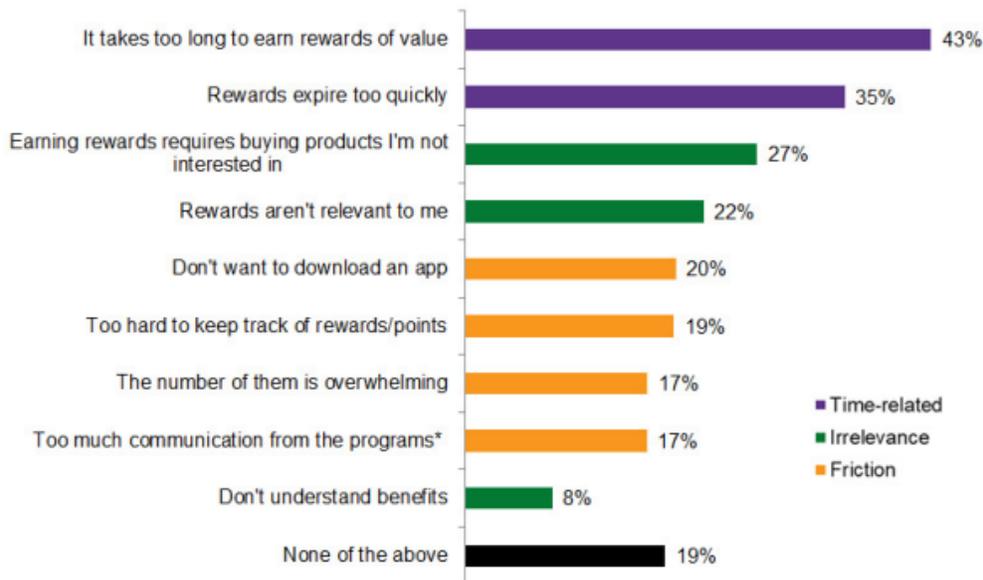
Challenges of Building Customer Loyalty

There are challenges for building customer loyalty among Millennials. For one, the casino hotel's features deemed impressive to older generations are not as impressive to the younger generation. Bowen & McCain (2015) stated that “the hotel features that attracted Baby Boomers will not be the hotel features that attract Millennials.” Baby Boomers are the generation born between 1946 & 1964 (O’Donnell, 2021). In 2015, a Las Vegas Convention and Visitors

Authority (LVCVA) visitor profile indicated that 79% of Baby Boomers stated their primary reason to visit Las Vegas was to gamble versus 63% of Millennials who came to gamble (Suh et al., 2017). The primary motivation of travel among the younger generation is to attend an entertainment event or special occasion, making it harder for the casino floor to catch the attention of the Millennial customer (Suh et al., 2017).

The next challenge is Millennials' lack of interest in casino reward programs. Studies have found that casino's traditional tier-based programs are "less effective" when marketed to Millennials (Bowen & McCain, 2015). A Mintel study on casinos stated that the youngest adults "are less likely to participate in a casino rewards program" (Casinos January, 2011). Reward programs can do the opposite of what they intend to do and potentially drive customers away from the brand if they "require extra steps/effort to use them" (Smith, 2020). A 2020 Mintel study on loyalty found that "consumers' frustration with loyalty programs center around time restrictions, lack of relevance and the level of effort required to participate and reap rewards" (Smith, 2020). This study also found that the top loyalty program barrier was "a program taking too long to earn rewards of value" (Smith, 2020). Figure 2 on the next page shows the leading loyalty program barriers found in this study.

Lastly, it can be challenging for a casino to maintain loyalty with older generations while building customer loyalty with a new generation. A casino may place too much effort on attracting the Millennial demographic and upset older generations who frequent the casino. Researchers who oppose casinos focusing on Millennials state that operators should "focus on the older casino demographics such as Baby Boomers" and stated that the younger generation only contributes to "7% of a casino's profit" (Suh et al., 2017).

Figure 2*Study findings on loyalty program barriers**“What don’t you like about loyalty programs? Please select all that apply.”*

Note. This figure shares the study results on what participants felt were barriers to joining a loyalty program. The number of participants in the Mintel study was 2,000 and were 18 years old and older. Taken from D. Smith. (2020). Loyalty programs: Incl impact of COVID-19. [Market report].

Millennial Gambling Behavior

Study findings reported that traditional gambling, such as slot machines, are “boring for some Millennials” (Suh et al., 2017). Parente (2017) argued that this younger generation “raised on adrenaline-pumping video games, mobile downloads, and social experiences” are “turned off by the solitary passivity of traditional slots...”. Studies have shown that “Millennials spent the least amount of time and money on gambling compared to other generations” (Suh et al., 2017). Although Millennials spend less money on the casino floor than other generations, they do gamble. Millennials gamble differently than their parents or grandparents and participate in

online or sports betting activities more often. This generation reported being “more interested in both online gambling and sports betting than in traditional land-based gambling games and venues” (Suh et al., 2017). However, research shows that table games are still attractive to Millennials. Table games such as blackjack and poker are still “considered more attractive” to Millennials (Suh et al., 2017). “While Millennials do not necessarily play longer and spend more on gambling,” the average time at table games per day was longer than those of Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Silent Generation noted in a 2016 LVCVA visitor profile (Suh et al., 2017).

Author Matt Assad (2017) noted that slot machines are “not entertaining enough” to “get Millennials in the door.” Suh et al. further argued that Millennials are “known to be more involved in online gambling than any other generation” (2017). The authors also have indicated that Millennials are taking a more significant interest in gambling thanks to “interactive skill-based table games” and mobile gambling now being offered at casinos lounges (Suh et al., 2017).

Whether for or against focusing on Millennials and gambling, studies show that many casino operators, marketers, game developers, and manufacturers are looking for ways to “accommodate Millennials” (Suh et al., 2017). Several casinos in Las Vegas have increased skill-based games on the casino floor and have added more non-gambling and entertainment amenities to attract Millennials. For example, the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas recently opened Level Up, a venue featuring interactive skill-based games, food, an indoor laser golf course, and virtual reality games alongside traditional casino games (Suh et al., 2017).

Building Loyalty Successfully

One way to build loyalty is through a loyalty program. Loyalty programs are a “win-win situation; customers receive promotional rewards while the casino operator learns more about its customers’ interests and habits” (Casinos January, 2011). Two examples of successful casino

loyalty programs are Total Rewards, Caesars Entertainment's "award-winning loyalty program," and MGM Resorts' M life (Total Rewards Caesars, 2014). Caesars Entertainment recently added TR Live Events. TR Live Events allows members to earn credits for purchases of tickets to shows, concerts, and sporting events across the United States and offers one-of-a-kind experiences and a tiered program with increased earning potential. M life provides "proprietary analytical technology that tracks consumers' preferences to create individual rewards that are meaningful to members" (MGM Resorts International, 2011). For example, someone attending a Madonna concert may receive an offer to see Lady Gaga, or a fine-dining connoisseur may be offered a private wine dinner.

Retail beauty leader Sephora is a prime example of building loyalty with Millennials. Sephora allows customers to try out their products in-store, providing an experiential benefit that Millennials value. It also provides points based on how much a consumer purchases. The more money one spends, the more points one earns. These points are linked to tiered status levels based on how many points are earned on their purchases. Studies have shown that "tiered status levels are of interest to roughly one-third" of Millennials (Smith, 2020). At the top level, customers gain access to personalized experiences like free makeovers and exclusive events.

McDonald's is an example of how knowing your audience can build loyalty. The company launched the "BTS Meal" campaign in May 2021 in collaboration with Korean pop (K-pop) double platinum group BTS, which is popular with the Millennial generation. Along with the actual meal, the company released two lines of merchandise named after popular BTS song titles. Jennifer Healan, McDonald's VP of U.S. marketing, brand content, and engagement, stated that this campaign was "all about meeting fans where they are" (Zafarris, 2021). The campaign was a massive success, with McDonald's "breaking prior social media engagement

records” and reported increased store visits by “12% in the week after the release” (O’Donnell, 2021). BTS content became the company’s top content ever for engagement, with the initial announcement generating more than “600,000 likes” on Twitter (Zafarris, 2021). McDonald’s TV commercial for the meal recorded 3.3 million views on YouTube in July 2021.

The Impact of COVID -19 On Loyalty Programs

Declared a global health pandemic in March 2020, COVID-19 impacted the gaming industry dramatically due to consumers choosing to stay at home rather than travel. During reemergence, businesses were allowed to operate with varying levels of social distancing measures in place. During the early stages of the pandemic in 2020, brand loyalty was based on the brand's effort to promote its value to the public. “Whether consumers support a brand and whether a brand can withstand unforeseen circumstances like the COVID -19 pandemic boils down to how much loyalty the brand propagates” (Smith, 2020).

Loyalty program memberships have been trending up, with an estimated “4-5 billion now offered in the US” (Smith, 2020). Growth in loyalty programs is likely to continue as businesses are scrambling to “keep current customers happy and make up for lost sales due to COVID-19” (Smith, 2020). Loyalty programs must ensure that their offerings and benefits deliver sufficient value to consumers based on their present and future wants and needs. The value that appears to be popular among consumers is a program that does not have expiration rules. Smith (2020) stated hotel brands have “eliminated expiration dates so points can be used at a later time when consumers are more comfortable traveling.”

While there is evidence that membership can increase traffic and sales, there is also evidence that consumers are “overwhelmed by the number of memberships and underwhelmed by the benefits” (Smith, 2020). Customers’ loyalties are turning more toward businesses that are

enforcing “safe health and hygiene practices, deliver value through the best deals and keep desired items in stock” (Smith, 2020). Smith (2020) also recommended that brands “make adjustments to their value propositions to drive acquisition, sweeten the pot relative to benefits and give consumers the element of choice in order to drive engagement.”

Summary

To build customer loyalty, casino operators should first learn the four phases of loyalty and the variables involved with consumer loyalty. The most important reasons to build customer loyalty with Millennials are their current spending power, fast growth, and current size compared to other generations. The biggest challenges in building customer loyalty are; hotel features that attract older generations are not attracting Millennials, the difficulty of maintaining customer loyalty across several generations, customers’ frustrations with current loyalty reward programs, and the infrequency of Millennials gambling. Brands like MGM Resorts, Caesars Entertainment, Sephora, and McDonald’s successfully build loyalty with consumers. These brands are successful because they offer opportunities to redeem rewards, successfully track consumer behavior for insights on their customers, and creatively build loyalty with their consumers.

When reviewing the gambling behavior of Millennials, they are more prone to frequent non-gaming amenities in casinos. If Millennials gamble, they prefer skill-based games or table games such as blackjack and poker over traditional casino games such as slot machines. Although COVID-19 has not decreased reward programs participation, it forced brands to offer more value to consumers looking to retain and build loyalty. Ways to provide more value to loyalty programs are eliminating expiration dates on redeemable points and delivering valuable benefits to consumers.

Conclusion

There are limited amounts of empirical research specifically addressing Millennials' gambling behaviors. While self-reported data collected from visitor profiles such as the LVCVA helps determine generational differences in casino gambling, more research is needed to explain gambling preferences across age demographics. The findings in this paper provide a small glimpse into Millennial gambling preferences. By providing details for Millennials' consumer behaviors, this paper intends to provide a foundation for future research to examine how to build customer loyalty amongst Millennials without isolating older demographics.

Chapter three explains how to execute and implement strategies to build customer loyalty with the Millennial generation. A marketing plan is devised for casino operators to strategize how to attract Millennials and effectively market the value of a brand with practical action plans. Lastly, the paper provides recommendations for casinos to increase customer awareness and build brand loyalty.

Chapter 3: Introduction

Chapter One introduced the problem of Millennials' lack of loyalty towards casinos. This paper's theoretical foundation of loyalty and its core components will help marketers better understand how consumers become attached to a brand. Chapter two discussed the benefits and challenges of building customer loyalty amongst Millennials. The paper showcased successful casino loyalty programs and other brands that succeed at customer loyalty. Chapter two also explored different types of gambling and non-gambling amenities that are attractive to Millennials. If the casino floor no longer provides value to the Millennial generation, all hope is not lost. There are multiple ways to increase the younger generation's engagement with a casino. Chapter three begins with a marketing plan complete with action plans designed to increase

brand awareness with Millennials. Following the marketing plan are proposed additional recommendations to build customer loyalty with the Millennial consumer.

Marketing Plan

Executive Summary

An initial offer may entice consumers to visit the hotel, but it is up to the brand to create programs and experiences that keep consumers coming back. Loyalty programs alone do not drive loyalty. Due to the size, fast growth, and spending power of the Millennial consumer, now is the time to target this demographic. The below marketing plan clearly defines a casino's goals and objectives, the strategies to build customer loyalty, and the specific action plans to carry out those strategies.

Situation Analysis

- a. Economic Outlook-** The United States confirmed the first COVID-19 case in January 2020 (Horton, 2021). President Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency in March 2020. As with other generations, the pandemic impacted Millennials' financial situation (Horton, 2021). However, Millennials are "optimistic about a return to normalcy..." (Horton, 2021). Millennials are finding ways to support causes during the pandemic. A Mintel report stated that 25% of Millennials "donated to a charity organization during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Horton, 2021).
- b. Market Population Trends-** Millennials "value spending on experiences..." (Horton, 2021). Horton (2021) stated that Millennials "view their love of experiences as part of their identity that defines them and differentiates them from previous generations." Also, Millennials like to "partner with brands that support

causes meaningful to them” (Horton, 2021). Once younger consumers see a brand catering to a meaningful cause, they are passionate about purchasing from them because they feel that they are making a difference. Casino operators should not assume that Millennials do not want to gamble but should consider researching what games they like to play. Millennials like online gambling, skill-based games, and table games such as poker and blackjack. They also enjoy online sports betting.

- c. The Competition-** Caesars Entertainment and MGM Resorts have successful casino reward programs. These programs can serve as a roadmap to casinos on how an effective program can build customer loyalty. To stay competitive, casinos should use multiple marketing promotions such as out-of-home advertising, social media marketing, print ads, television ads, and media advertising to deliver engaging and relevant content.
- d. The Customer-** According to a 2021 Mintel study on Millennials, this group is “25% more likely than other generations to say that the recommendations of friends” would encourage them to “pay a slightly higher price” for a product or service (Horton, 2021). Millennials represent “one-quarter of the nation’s overall population” (Suh et al., 2017). Millennials are not known for being “overly loyal to any brand”; thus, it’s critical for brands “to incorporate the types of rewards that could be of the most interest to them...” (Smith, 2020). Social media is a popular platform for their communication. “Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram” are their platforms of choice, and they “see these platforms as a convenient way to communicate with and learn about brands” (Smith, 2020). Millennials are

“willing to pay more for a product or service that is trusted and high quality, as well as something that benefits others” (Smith, 2020).

- e. **SWOT Analysis-** A casino must examine the property’s physical strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Is the property’s location near a major highway? Does the property lack parking, dining outlets, or other amenities that present a disadvantage in the marketplace? Is there an opportunity to increase the amenities in the casino? Will a competitor’s new casino or installation of a buffet pose a threat? A SWOT analysis “gives the marketer the ability to take advantage of the property’s strengths and new opportunities, to overcome its weaknesses, and plan for possible threats” (Klebanow, 2021). Once a hotel conducts a SWOT analysis, the casino will know where they stand amongst their competitors and the industry.

Marketing Objectives and Strategy

- f. **Mission Statement-** To create a welcoming environment and breathtaking experiences that engage, amuse, and stimulate all senses.
- g. **Goals and Objectives-** To build customer loyalty amongst the Millennial target market. Increase engagement between Millennials and casino games. Increase room bookings with the Millennial demographic by a predetermined percentage by a predetermined quarter of the next fiscal year.
- h. **Strategy-** Studies have shown that “it is still a challenge to attract Millennials to the casino floor” (Suh et al., 2017). “Millennials are the only generation more focused on experiences,” so it is recommended to develop an experiential marketing campaign (Horton. 2021). For example, if a guest stays three nights at

the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino in Las Vegas, the casino could provide tickets to the Shark Aquarium. Or, if a guest stays two nights at the Linq Hotel in Las Vegas, they can get two free tickets for Fly Linq, the zip line that flies over the Las Vegas Strip. The point is to design a campaign that engages the consumer and creates a real-life experience that they will remember.

Action Plans

- i. **Strengthen Social Media Presence-** Posting content that is engaging and relevant to your customer “will help them become interested in your business and hopefully influence them to inquire about the products and services” (Kern, 2016). This generation enjoys “cleaner, minimalist, aspirational content” (Horton, 2021). Show Instagram influencers enjoying different aspects of the property in a social media ad. Create a social media ad showing a Millennial actor celebrating winning at a blackjack table or a group of Millennials posing for pictures in front of a beautiful aesthetic in the hotel lobby. Having a presence on high-traffic social media channels will “help to build brand awareness for your business” (Kern, 2016).
- j. **Evaluate The Existing Loyalty Program-** Loyalty programs should “help customers engage with the brand,” enhance the casino experience, and “drive purchase frequency and increase customer lifetime value” (Tierney, n.d.). The existing reward program of a casino hotel needs to offer “convenience, simplicity and instant benefits that shoppers actually want” (Kern, 2016). Ensure the rewards program is easy to sign up for, be accessible, and easy to manage online and on a mobile app. It is helpful to remember that “clearly explaining how points are

earned, what they are good for, and other tangible benefits can “lay the foundation for building customer loyalty” (Klebanow, 2021). Make the program appealing by adding exclusive experiential benefits and discounts.

- i. Provide a gift when a new member signs up. For example, give the reward member free access to a workout class in the hotel or curate an event that only members can join. Offering benefits such as these will “build strong connections with members and create a unified brand community” (Tierney, n.d.).

- k. **Promote Sustainability-** Millennials are interested in factors such as “sustainability” and “products that are ethically made” (Horton, 2021). Promote on the website, social media accounts, and printed ads how the casino is improving the world and state how consumers’ purchases make a difference in specific communities. Support local suppliers by purchasing from them, buying produce from a local farm, or selling local vendors’ products in a gift shop.
- l. **Segment Millennials By Age-** Create distinct campaigns for younger and older Millennials. “Brands will want to treat the Millennial generation as two separate cohorts as they are at different life stages and require different approaches” (Horton, 2020). Younger Millennials, born between 1989 and 1996, are “focused on growing their careers and establishing independence” (Horton, 2021). Design a campaign that promotes experiences, wellness, and indulgences that remind them to take a break from work and treat themselves. Design a different campaign for older Millennials, born between 1980 and 1988. For older Millennials, “the focus in life shifts from career to family,” so promote a

campaign that shows fun family activities in the non-gaming amenities of the casino (Horton, 2021). A Millennial Mintel study in 2020 found that “those ages 25-44 account for 65% of Americans who have children,” making Millennials the prime target audience for products and services related to parenting” (Horton, 2020).

- m. **Create a Media Plan-** Design a media plan for the entire year. Decide what media channels and platforms to share content. Determine the timing and frequency of the media and content desired to publish and share. Publish web banners on Facebook, create paid social media ads on Instagram, design a casino branded filter on Tic Tok, or post mobile ads on websites to promote the casino.
- n. **Increase Digital Advertising-** According to a Mintel study on multicultural youth, the younger generation “spends much of its time on digital media,” with “90% or more of each racial or ethnic subgroup watching streaming videos in a week...” (O’Donnell, 2021). Take advantage of this by sharing content on streaming devices such as Roku, Apple TV, or Firestick by Amazon. O’Donnell (2021) stated that the “use of streaming video and audio far outweighs use of live or recorded TV.” A casino hotel must curate its online persona to fit the best platform and use that platform to communicate with the Millennial generation effectively.
- o. **Design New Hotel Offers-** “Promotional offers appear to be most effective for adults 21-24” and could entice this demographic (Casino January, 2011). Casino operators face competition within their region, so designing promotional offerings is needed to stay ahead of the competition. Millennials are “less focused on price

and more focused on how brands can provide them with added value” (Horton, 2021). Don’t just offer a room discount. Design an offer that combines a room discount with a spa credit or a room offer with a food & beverage voucher. The key to remember is that for brands to appeal to Millennials, “they will need to promote their product or service beyond the price” (Horton, 2021). Providing additional value that can enhance a guest’s experience “can persuade Millennials to pay more” (Horton, 2021).

Marketing and Advertising Budget

- p. Calculate a comprehensive budget based on these action plans. The casino could increase its revenue, increase market share, and build customer loyalty with Millennials with an effective strategy in place.

Recommendations

Offer Paid Loyalty Programs

Paid programs require a fee to be paid upfront or monthly before joining. Studies found that Millennials are the most likely generation “to belong to paid programs” (Smith, 2020). Premium loyalty programs are an opportunity to win over Millennials. According to a Clarus Commerce study, “81% of traditional loyalty program members would join a premium program” if offered (Tierney, n.d.). Consider adding a premium, paid loyalty program to build customer loyalty. Premium loyalty programs provide the consumer with instant access to top-tier benefits that are not available to the average non-paid member. A premium loyalty program may help a casino develop a deeper connection with its customers because of its instant, 24/7 access to top-tier benefits. If a premium loyalty program consistently engages with its customers and provides personalized, exclusive benefits, this could make customers feel special and valued. Small perks

like a free cocktail, spa credits, complimentary room service, or an option for a late checkout time could help customers see the benefits of participating and signing up for a premium rewards program.

Research what consumers would like to see in a premium rewards program and inquire how much they would pay for such a program. Pete Fader, a professor at Wharton School, stated it best- figure out what the consumer is willing to pay more for “in exchange for more value and design something just for them” (Tierney, n.d.). Design a focus group of adults aged 25 and 41 (ages identified in this paper as Millennials) and develop questions on their opinions of paid loyalty programs, desired price points of a premium loyalty program, and desired values of paid reward programs.

Based on the responses of the focus group, conduct a self-administered five-point Likert scale questionnaire and select participants visiting the casino to participate. Ask the survey participants what would make them join a premium program and get demographic information such as sex, income, age, etc. These demographic questions could provide insight into whether younger Millennials prefer something different over Older Millennials or if one sex prefers premium programs over another. Casino operators can develop a quality premium program based on these results if the survey results favor creating one.

Surprise and Delight

Next, incorporate a surprise and delight element when interacting with Millennials. “Exclusive offerings are valued by 44% of Millennials...” (Smith, 2020). Develop personalized rewards to attract Millennial customers if booking a room. Unexpected gifts and special recognition can “provide exceptional value to customers and can create the fun experiences they desire” (Smith, 2020). Recognizing a birthday with a small gift or offering surprise rewards

when signing up for a loyalty program can “spark joy amongst clientele and establish long-term emotional loyalty” (Smith, 2020). More than likely, the Millennial guest will post the surprise on social media, which will bring even more brand awareness to the hotel via organic social media marketing. Millennials associate with brands that offer “instant benefits” (Smith, 2020).

Segmenting Millennials by Ethnicity

Hispanic Millennials

“Despite falling into one generation, millennials are not a uniform, homogeneous group with a common set of beliefs, interests, and behaviors” (Kern, 2016). Hispanics account for “one in five US Millennials” and have “positive attitudes toward marketing and what brands have to say...” (Ruiz, 2021). If wanting to advertise to Hispanic Millennials, marketers must learn about their culture. According to a study on Hispanics Millennials, this group attributes online video ads as one of their “top leisure activities” (Ruiz, 2021). Create Spanish-speaking internet ads that will show on streaming devices such as Roku, Apple TV, or Amazon’s Firestick. “Brands that communicate in Spanish can get positive results” (Ruiz, 2021). “The diversity of the Hispanic Millennial population creates opportunities for brands on multiple fronts,” so do not be afraid to recognize different Latino cultures (Ruiz, 2021).

Showcase Hispanic influencers to promote experiences on social media and use Hispanic models in promotional ads on the property. “Brands can inspire by showcasing people Hispanic Millennials can relate to” (Ruiz, 20201). Promote non-gaming amenities that are affordable. “Highlighting affordability” increases brands’ reach among Hispanic Millennials and “is critical to drive loyalty and stand out” (Ruiz, 2021).

African-American Millennials

To resonate with and attract African-American Millennials, marketers should know that they “value brands that support and advocate for the Black community” (Macke, 2021). Show support for the Black community by supporting their causes on the casino’s website and social media pages. Sponsor Black festivals in the community. Partner with Black influencers on social media and post them finding unique property gems online. “The majority of Black Millennials agree that social media influencers and celebrities help them discover products and services” and stated that “influencers’ recommendations feel authentic...” (Macke, 2021). Studies found that black consumers are active social media users and “over-index for using YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok” (Macke, 2021). When asked in a recent study, what was the preferred advertising methods of Black consumers, studies found that online video advertising stood out as being “uniquely appealing to Millennials” (Macke, 2021).

Research has indicated that a “value/convenience model may be more effective with black adults” and that “proximity, dining, [and] hotel with best rooms” are ranked high with this group. A 2021 Mintel study on Black Millennials stated that they “associate brand loyalty with affordability and quality” (Macke, 2021). Knowing this information, casinos should develop a hotel offer combined with a food & beverage voucher to attract this demographic. (Casinos January, 2011).

Asian Millennials

To build customer loyalty with Asian Millennials, create a presence on the social media app *WeChat*, an instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app. The mobile payment app benefits Asian Millennials because it “makes life easier and more comfortable” (Noormohamed, 2019). This platform is free to download, and “among all the WeChat users,

Millennials is the majority” (Cai, 2017). Casinos can utilize a feature called “Moments” that uploads pictures, videos, and articles about the property. Guests can also use “Moments” to share their experiences on the app, resulting in positive electronic word of mouth towards the casino.

“More than six in ten Asian young adults would like to see more ads featuring people that look like them” (O’Donnell, 2021). Relevant advertising that features Asian Millennials could potentially “drive purchasing and loyalty amongst this group- particularly since there is comparatively little competition” (O’Donnell, 2021). There is a clear opportunity to generate a deeper connection with this demographic. Casino brands that succeed in authentically representing the Asian community could benefit substantially.

Design a Public Relations Campaign

Another recommendation is to officially adopt a cause that the casino supports publically and develop a public relations campaign surrounding the casino’s efforts. As mentioned, Millennials “want to partner with brands that support causes meaningful to them” (Horton, 2021). In an official press release, the casino can document how consumers’ purchases support a particular cause, which in turn will “increase their brand equity with Millennial consumers” (Horton, 2021). Follow up the press release by posting related content on the website with images of employees doing community service. Next, develop a social media ad that highlights the casino’s support of that particular cause. For example, if the casino decides to fight hunger in the local community, share images of donated leftover food dropped off at a local shelter. On social media and the website, highlight employees volunteering at a food bank or show chefs cooking meals for a Ronald McDonald’s House. It is essential to document these instances in the press release and online. “Brands’ stances on important social issues and their efforts to give

back to the greater good could do more to drive customer loyalty than loyalty programs” (Smith, 2020).

Offer Non-gaming Amenities

Increase non-gaming amenities on the property, such as hosting concerts by local and national performers. Add other amenities to attract Millennials, such as a virtual reality game room or a newly designed sports betting lounge. Host popular DJs to perform at the nightclub or upgrade the cabanas at the pools. Casino operators should also evaluate non-gaming amenities that might entice them to visit the casino.

Also, to attract a typical non-casino visitor, improve the casino's interior design. Millennials that “may not necessarily care for the craps table or baccarat may enjoy visually appealing décor and plush accommodations” (Concepcion, 2018). Add visually appealing signs and artsy walls to encourage people to take selfies near them. Moxy Marriott International is an excellent hotel example that attracts the younger market. Locations under the Moxy umbrella “bring bold yet playful elements to guests” through unique amenities, bright décor, and stylish communal spaces (Huard, 2018). Near the hotel entrance is a large neon sign that reads, “If you love me, let me know,” where guests take selfies beneath the sign (Huard, 2018). Moxy’s other amenities include a game room, classic arcade games, shuffleboard, and a life-size Jenga game. Although there is a risk in creating more appealing amenities just for a younger demographic, Moxy is a prime example of how it can work effectively.

Diversify Casino Games

Studies have shown that Millennials are open to playing skill-based games. “Young people want games of skill and not just fantasy or online gambling” (Assad, 2017). Skill-based games are different because they work more like video games, and the player uses a joystick

rather than buttons or a handle like on a regular slot machine. Skill-based games encourage the player to “pump more money into the machine to practice, thinking the big payoff will come later when the player has become more skillful” (Assad, 2017). Meet with casino games developers and ask about new and upcoming skill-based casino games available to purchase. Once purchased, design a promotional campaign to attract Millennials to visit the property to play the latest games. Next, evaluate how game participation is amongst Millennials.

Another recommendation is to offer free branded versions of popular casino games on smartphone apps. These smartphone games could introduce popular casino-style games to newbies to develop their comfort level with the game strategy. Once they are comfortable playing, it may increase their confidence to move from the mobile device to the actual table on the casino floor. Additionally, “these games could drive foot traffic and increase visitation by offering nonmonetary winnings” in the form of vouchers for use at the actual casino. Offering free casino games can introduce young gamers to the brand, while the casino’s latest promotion or hotel offer can display mobile ads in the app to promote visitation.

Implications and Conclusion

Customer loyalty is becoming harder for brands to obtain. Consumers want to feel instant gratification and desire value when they patronize brands. Loyalty programs are a valuable tool to build consumer loyalty. Casino operators could develop a premium rewards program with exclusive benefits to attract the Millennial consumer. Millennials want an experience when they patronize a brand and want a seamless process when purchasing a service or product. Since “Millennials love experiences,” brands should capitalize on their spending power and “emphasize the experiential component of their product” (Horton, 2021).

Brands that highlight their social sustainability will resonate well with the younger generation. Casinos must ensure the offerings and benefits of the property deliver value to the Millennial consumer based on their current and future wants and needs. These wants and needs may go beyond just newer casino games. Upgrading the casino with stylish décor, providing attractive non-gaming amenities, offering promotional offers, and regularly posting engaging social media content are beneficial methods to help build customer loyalty with Millennials and casinos.

Limitations of Research

Most of the literature reviewed focused on building loyalty with brands, not casinos specifically. Additionally, most of the literature review about Millennials and their loyalty preferences was for brands as a whole. Due to the lack of research on Millennials and their casino preferences in literature research, this paper lays the foundation for future research on their consumer behavior in the casino industry. This study can also help casino operators develop more casino games that appeal to Millennials. It is recommended that future research examine Millennials and their expectations and desired values of casinos.

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