

## Center for Gaming Research Occasional Paper Series

University Libraries

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

### From the Last Frontier to the New Cosmopolitan A History of Casino Public Relations in Las Vegas

*Jessalynn Strauss*

**ABSTRACT:** This research chronicles the history of public relations by the gaming industry in Las Vegas. Reflecting larger trends in the field, public relations efforts by the casinos and hotels in this popular tourist destination have used a variety of communication tactics over time to promote themselves to potential Las Vegas tourists. Based on archival materials from over 30 casinos and gaming corporations, this paper identifies four ways in which public relations is practiced in the gaming industry and four macro-level trends in the evolution of casino public relations in Las Vegas.

**Keywords:** public relations, casinos, Las Vegas, communication, marketing

In the movie *Casino*, loosely based on the real-life story of Las Vegas casino manager Frank “Lefty” Rosenthal, Robert DeNiro’s Ace Rothstein comes to Las Vegas to run the fictional Tangiers casino. There’s just one problem: Ace is a noted gambler and bookie who has run afoul of the law on several occasions. Even in the rough and tumble heyday of 1970s Las Vegas, Ace knows he won’t be given a gambling license. The hidden “money” behind the casino, a Chicago mobster, suggests that Ace give himself a fictional job title that won’t tie him to the casino’s gaming function. And so Ace Rothstein becomes the Director of Public Relations for the Tangiers Casino.

Ace Rothstein’s work at the fictional Tangiers resembles nothing like what we

know as public relations, but this raises the question: What role did public relations play in the promotion of Las Vegas’s hotel-casinos? This research seeks to chronicle the history of public relations by the gaming/tourism industry in Las Vegas. Overall, the definition of the term “public relations” has changed over the years, and a practice that was once limited to disseminating information via the mass media has evolved into one that utilizes a broad range of communication media to connect with interested publics. Similarly, public relations efforts by the casinos and hotels in this popular tourist destination have used a variety of communication tactics over time to promote themselves to potential Las Vegas tourists.

The logo for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), consisting of the letters "UNLV" in a large, bold, serif font.

The history of the Las Vegas gaming industry, and the industry's focus on promoting the city's attractions to out-of-town tourists, provide an unusual and challenging context for a history of its public relations practices. As the industry and its targeted markets have evolved over the years, the use of communication to build relationships with these target publics has understandably changed as well. Communication used to promote the casino industry and the "Las Vegas experience" has also been dramatically influenced by changes in technology, most recently the evolution of social media as a direct-to-consumer communication tool.

This research examines the evolution of public relations efforts in the Las Vegas gaming industry in order to provide context for future study of the contemporary use of new communication technologies, specifically social media, by the corporations in this industry. An understanding of the history of public relations in this industry will help inform present-day research by providing background on the kind of efforts that have previously been undertaken to promote casinos, gambling, and the Las Vegas experience.

This industry-specific history will also provide an in-depth look at how public relations practices have evolved and been affected by environmental factors. By considering contextual factors such as the history of Las Vegas and its casino gaming industry, as well as economic pressures that have influenced the industry, this research will provide a fully informed and well-rounded picture of how public relations efforts have influenced the development of this tourist mecca and American cultural icon.

In 1905, the city of Las Vegas, NV was an unremarkable town, centered around a small train depot, in the middle of an unrelenting desert. Just over one hundred years later, Las Vegas is a controversial icon

of U.S. success and excess. As the only U.S. city founded after 1900 to reach a population of over 1 million, Las Vegas has played an interesting and integral role in the development of the modern United States landscape. Its iconic casinos and hotels are recognized by people all over the world for their depictions of world landmarks such as the pyramids of Egypt and Paris's Eiffel Tower. Few people recognize, however, the role played by public relations in developing, promoting, and popularizing this town as an "oasis in the desert" and a destination for generations of tourists.

### Literature Review

#### Settlement and early history of Las Vegas

Originally a small Mormon settlement, and later an equally small railroad town, Las Vegas began to grow as workers on the Boulder Dam (later the Hoover Dam, built from 1931-1935) came to its friendly environs to escape the strict regulations of the workers' residence town, Boulder City. Gambling was legalized in Nevada by the state legislature in 1931, but both gambling and drinking were strictly forbidden in Boulder City. Dam workers would frequently pick up their paychecks and head straight for Las Vegas, where both vices were legal (M. Land & B. Land, 1999). Almost since the town's inception, Las Vegas's economy has been based on gambling and associated with vice.

When the steady stream of gamblers from the dam project dried up after the structure was completed in 1935, many thought the town of Las Vegas would dry up as well. But several far-sighted entrepreneurs saw in Las Vegas a potential tourist destination for those drawn by the lure of legalized gambling. Some of these early hoteliers and casino owners were legitimate businessmen, often from the West Coast, but many of them came from places as far away as Chicago, Cleveland, and New York

and had ties to those cities' largest Mafia families. As the building boom began and hotel-casinos began springing up along Highway 97, later to be known as the Las Vegas Strip, city residents welcomed the prosperity and turned a blind eye to the Mafia connections of the casinos' owners (Ferrari & Ives, 2005).

#### From mobsters to businessmen

Many of these Mob-connected casino owners were colorful, iconic characters whose presence dominated the early history of the town. In the 1940s and 1950s, they were not unwelcome; in fact, many believed that the unofficial "system" of mob justice helped discourage crime and petty theft in the town (M. Land & B. Land, 1999). Moreover, these mobsters were good for business and for the development of Las Vegas into a viable city rather than a railroad-stop town. By building increasingly large hotel-casinos on previously undeveloped land on the Strip, they brought jobs and tax revenue into the local economy (Rothman, 2002). Many Las Vegans welcomed even the dubious notoriety these mobsters' presence and prominence in the local economy brought to the town (M. Land & B. Land, 1999).

#### The Howard Hughes era

As officials looked to clean up their city's image in the wake of Senator Estes Kefauver's investigations into organized crime in Las Vegas, the early mobster/casino owners eventually wore out their welcome in the city. In their place rose Las Vegas's next larger-than-life figure – reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, who purchased the Desert Inn in 1967. Although a respectable businessman like Hughes seemed to be an answer to reformers' prayers, by that point he was already a bit of an oddball. However unconventional Hughes's personal and business practices might have been, this era in casino ownership provided a transition to later

phases of corporatization and conglomeration.

Hughes's impact on Las Vegas was swift and significant. After he purchased the Desert Inn, he continued to purchase surrounding casino properties, making it clear that he intended to stay in Las Vegas for an extended time. Local leaders must have been delighted at Hughes's grandiose vision for Southern Nevada:

Less than a year after he set up quarters in the Desert Inn, Hughes issued a statement to Southern Nevadans. He was going to improve the face of the Silver State. He promised to help diversify the economy by creating industry of the sort that had made him rich and famous.

Hughes painted a future in which Las Vegas would become a clean, bright, shining city in the sun. "We can make a really super environment: no smog, no contamination, efficient local government, where the taxpayers pay as little as possible and get something for their money," Hughes wrote in a memo. (Smith, 2005, pp. 80-81)

Due in part to Hughes's declining health and increasing eccentricities, his vision for Las Vegas was never realized.

When Hughes departed Las Vegas in 1970, the city was once more left to its own devices. Into the void of power created by the absence of Hughes's overwhelming influence came a new breed of casino owners: entrepreneurial businessmen looking to cash in on Las Vegas's ability to draw tourists willing to part with their money (Smith, 2005). Although brief, Hughes's involvement in the evolution of the Las Vegas casino industry brought a marked change in the amount of capital that developers were able to access for building improvement and expansion, construction of new casinos, and purchase of existing casinos. This change foreshadowed the coming trend of casino

ownership by corporate interests, which were able to access far more capital than their predecessors from organized crime.

#### Corporatization of gaming in Las Vegas

The 1970s also saw the beginnings of the corporatization of the gaming industry in Las Vegas. Hilton Hotel owners Barron and Conrad Hilton successfully lobbied the Nevada Gaming Commission to change its rules on casino ownership, paving the way for corporations with multiple stockholders to acquire gaming licenses without requiring background checks for every investor (Ferrari & Ives, 2005). Many hotel chains, such as Holiday Inn and Ramada Inns, tried their hands in the Las Vegas hotel-casino business, but ultimately most were not well suited to gaming endeavors, and they sold their interests in Las Vegas (Gottdiener, Collins, & Dickens, 1999).

However, the face of the Las Vegas gaming industry was irrevocably changed by this revision to the Gaming Commission's regulation. Potential casino owners now had the option of raising capital by offering stock shares in a publicly held corporation rather than relying on private financing. This ability to raise large amounts of capital made the old model of casinos funded and run by organized crime "financially obsolete" (Rothman, 2002, p. 22). In addition, public corporations could purchase casinos, once they had been approved for a gaming license, and having done so once, many corporations continued to buy and sell casino operations in Las Vegas and elsewhere (Gottdiener, Collins, & Dickens, 1999). The post-Hughes era of development in Las Vegas showed a strong trend toward incorporation and conglomeration.

Corporate investment was slow to take off because of the stigma of casino gambling: crime-ridden, mobbed-up, and socially unacceptable to the mainstream. To put it another way, "The general view on Wall Street was that the casino industry wasn't

*nice*. Investors would rather buy tobacco stocks" (Binkley, 2008, p. 22). Loans given by the Teamsters' Union in the 1970s to casino-hotel operators to build large resorts including Caesars Palace and Circus Circus laid the groundwork by "legitimizing" these endeavors as worthy of investment, even though there was some shadiness with respect to the dealings between operators and notorious Teamsters' Union president Jimmy Hoffa (Schwartz, 2003, p. 110).

It would be the 1990s, though, before Wall Street investors caught on to the potential for profit in Las Vegas gambling stocks, later sanitized and called "gaming" stocks to reflect a greater mainstream acceptance of gambling as an acceptable recreational pastime (Rothman, 2002). This greater acceptance could be attributed to a somewhat-misguided attempt, early in the city's mega-resort development era, to turn Las Vegas into a family-friendly vacation destination (Binkley, 2008). Once the gaming industry became corporatized, it paved the way for the staggering growth in the Strip casino-hotels, and by extension in the city, of the period beginning with the opening of the Mirage in 1989. In this way, "the publicly accepted truism that the corporations had driven out mob interests and made gaming respectable, which was a powerful idea that itself served to legitimize the industry, camouflaged the true crisis that corporations had solved, that of capital" (Schwartz, 2003, p. 163).

Corporate ownership brought pressure on the gaming corporations to generate the steady, predictable profit streams acceptable to investors and shareholders (Binkley, 2008). This has led to significant changes in the casino industry as gaming corporations attempted to create more consistent cash flows through non-gambling expenditures (Stein, 2004). For instance, after gaming revenues declined significantly following the 2008 economic crash, gaming corporations turned to new communication technologies, such as

Facebook and Twitter, in order to promote their products in new and different ways (Schwartz, 2010).

In early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Las Vegas, the trends towards corporatization and conglomeration first seen in the 1970s have reached their high point. Three corporations primarily own the casinos that make up Las Vegas's Strip: MGM Mirage, Caesars (formerly Harrah's) Entertainment, and Wynn Resorts (Binkley, 2008). A fourth, Sheldon Adelson's Las Vegas Sands Corporation, owns two of the Strip's largest high-end properties, the Venetian and the Palazzo, in addition to other gambling properties overseas. Two other gaming corporations own a number of casino properties in Las Vegas: Boyd Gaming, which also owns properties in Atlantic City and the Midwest, and Station Casinos, which owns and operates 10 "off-Strip" casinos in the Las Vegas metropolitan area which largely cater to a local audience.

#### History of Modern Public Relations

Most public relations histories portray the modern practice of the profession as one that has ancient roots dating back well back into the BC era. These histories often divide modern public relations history into distinct chronological periods for didactic purposes, and although the periods do vary in length and labeling, all generally provide "a development from manipulative beginnings to symmetric communication" (Hoy, Raaz, & Wehmeier, 2007, p. 197). Although there is no standardization of the history or chronological periods through which the profession evolved, the time period being examined in this research (post-World War II to the present) is commonly acknowledged as the "modern" era of public relations, separate from the primitive media relations practiced by Ivy Lee and the manipulation of public opinion ascribed to Edward Bernays (e.g., Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006; Seitel, 2004; Wilcox & Cameron, 2006).

Although there has not been a comprehensive history of the use of the press release by public relations practitioners, most seem to agree that the practice originated when Ivy Lee responded to a train crash involving Pennsylvania Railroad— then one of Lee's clients in the early practice of corporate public relations — in 1906. Lee's early work with corporations such as Pennsylvania Railroad and John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil focused almost exclusively on placing positive stories about his clients in the newspaper, which at that point was the primary way that most people received their news (O'Brien, 2005).

The press release, along with the media relations component of the practice of public relations, has been influenced over time by the change in mass media and communication technologies. The widespread use of the press release — and some might say its value — diminished with the introduction of the World Wide Web as a communication tool for public relations practitioners. A 2000 study showed that use of the Web for public relations purposes, while still minor in the public relations practitioner's list of priorities, could help demonstrate the organization's technological aptitude, supplement traditional media relations, help the organization reach new audiences, and build relationships (Hill & White, 2000).

Over time, Web sites became valuable tools for organizations to use to provide a nearly unlimited amount of information to audiences such as news media (Callison, 2003). In fact, some industry pundits have even taken to proclaiming the "death of the press release" (Dumenco, 2010), due to the Internet's ability to distribute information more efficiently to publics, especially when social media are used effectively. Using these communication technologies allows organizations to reach their publics directly, eliminating the need to use the media as an intervening public.

The Web also began to be used for the purposes of invoking and promoting dialogue between organizations and their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998), opening a new line of direct-to-consumer communication that had previously been unavailable to organizations, forcing them to communicate through intervening publics such as the media. With this evolution into “Web 2.0,” organizations were able to solicit feedback and interact with publics through tools such as blogs and, later, social media.

### Research Questions

**RQ1:** How is public relations practiced by Las Vegas casinos?

**RQ2:** How has this practice changed over time?

### Method

Research for this project was completed in the archive at the UNLV Special Collections Library during two weeks in March 2012. The researcher examined public relations and promotions archival material from 34 individual casinos and gaming corporations and took notes pertaining to common themes that arose in the materials. Seven trends were identified in the examination of the materials: an evolution from cooperation among individual casino properties to the corporate ownership and cross-promotion of multiple casinos; the use of various tactics to differentiate casinos from competitors in a growing market; the market-specific evolution and use of the publicity stunt; the changing use of media relations, including press releases and increasingly elaborate press kits and promotional materials, by casinos; the increasing use of public relations agencies by casinos; and the changing trends in direct-to-consumer communication

through magazines, brochures, newsletters, and ultimately social media.

Because this research focused on the topic of public relations in the casino industry, it faced a few challenges and limitations related to this focus. Due to the unique nature of the casino industry, it is often difficult to distinguish between efforts at public relations, advertising, and marketing. Hashimoto (2008) identifies public relations and publicity of one of four components to a casino’s marketing and promotion strategy, the other three being personal sales (i.e. group sales), sales promotion (i.e. tournaments and junkets) and advertising. In order to comprehensively consider public relations in the casino industry, this research cast a fairly wide net in considering actions and artifacts that could be part of this endeavor. The researcher also considered the broader definition of public relations as relationship building and maintenance in order to be inclusive of all potential public relations efforts undertaken by the casinos in the Las Vegas gaming industry.

Due to the nature of the materials available in the collection, this research took a macro level approach by looking at larger trends of change in casino industry public relations. The collection is in no way complete or comprehensive, and some casinos have more archival material than others. This research was completed over the course of one week in March 2012 during a residency fellowship funded by the Center for Gaming Research. Due to both time limitations and the inability to consider the materials possessed as a valid sample, a full-scale content analysis of materials was inappropriate, not to mention impossible.

### Findings

RQ1: How is public relations practiced in the Las Vegas casino industry?

An understanding of how public relations has changed in the Las Vegas casino industry requires that one first describe how public relations is practiced in this industry. Examination of the archival material revealed how Las Vegas casinos practiced what could be considered as public relations in four different ways. This section starts by describing the four types of public relations practiced in Las Vegas casinos as personal relations, strategic relationship building, publications, and media relations.

**Personal relationships** have contributed to success for the corporations in the casino gaming industry since its inception. Early Las Vegas casino-hotels paid extraordinary attention to customer service and were known for attending to the needs of hotel patrons. This was especially true for celebrity guests, upon whom casinos were dependent to raise the casino's profile and generate media coverage and buzz for the casino. As an example, archives from the El Rancho Vegas (open in the 1940s and 1950s) show the preparations made by hotel staff for the wedding of guests Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman in 1958. Not only did the hotel completely arrange the wedding and reception, but the entire affair was provided free of charge to the famous couple and their guests. The importance of personal relationships in the successful operation of a casino corporation lives on today in the casino host, an employee whose sole responsibility is to facilitate the needs of customers expected to wager large amounts of money.

Casinos have also used public relations to develop advantageous **relationships** for business purposes. For instance, as air travel technology developed and Las Vegas's visitors increasingly started arriving by airplane, casinos partnered with travel agencies to promote packages that combined the guest's air and hotel fare. Archives for a number of casinos contained promotional brochures that were co-

branded with the casino and a travel agency. Cross-promotions with products such as cars and other items used in giveaways also shows an avenue for relationship building employed by casinos.

Casinos have also long enjoyed and nurtured fruitful relationships with businesses. The evolution of Las Vegas as a "business" destination, as evidenced by archival material, is particularly interesting in light of recent controversies over the use of Las Vegas for a business purposes. Early "business" trips to Las Vegas were promoted primarily as "men's golf trip" outings and clearly appealed to a higher socioeconomic class. Once Las Vegas's casinos realized the potential for fruitful partnerships with those in the business world, they developed larger facilities and promoted their meeting spaces and convention centers for business purposes. These individual casinos' meeting space was eventually eclipsed by the city's enormous convention center, and Las Vegas secured its current status as a prominent location for conventions and conferences for businesses as well as associations and trades.

Public relations in the casino industry was often purveyed through the creation and distribution of controlled media such as magazines and brochures. These **publications** allowed casinos to communicate directly with patrons without the use of media as an intervening public. Publications of this nature were found in archival records dating back to the earliest days of Las Vegas's casinos. Although we now think of these publications as quite commonplace, their prominence in the public relations efforts of casinos, even from an early date, is noteworthy. The evolution of these publications over time will be described in a later section.

Following the most conventional definition of public relations, the casino industry has also employed traditional **media relations**. The discussion of this use

of media relations, which follows in a later section, highlights some important changes in the use of the press release and the need to use different approaches for niche media — here, the tourist/visitor magazine market. Casinos' use of media relations also expanded to include the business press as their business operations became increasingly corporatized.

#### RQ2: How has the practice of public relations in the casino industry changed?

Returning to the brief history of Las Vegas given in the literature review, it is important to highlight two elements of Las Vegas that have changed considerably in ways that affect the evolution of the casino industry's public relations efforts. The trend toward consolidation of many casinos under one corporate entity, and the increased focus on the business side of casinos, has created a state of public relations for the gaming industry that is, at present, vastly different than the same endeavor in the city's early days. The number of casinos in Las Vegas has also grown exponentially, and with increased competition has come the need for individual casinos to differentiate themselves from other casinos in hopes of attracting customers. Both the increasing trend toward corporatization and the enormous expansion in the casino market have significantly impacted the development of public relations practices throughout Las Vegas's history until the present day.

#### From cooperation to competition

These large-scale movements toward corporatization and expansion seem to have influenced the first notable change in Las Vegas's public relations over time: Where individually-owned casinos in the city's early days tended to cooperate with others for promotion, today's casino corporations solely promote the casinos owned by that corporation to the exclusion of others. An

examination of promotional materials from early casinos shows that these casinos often included information on other properties' entertainment and attractions. In Las Vegas's early days as a tourist attraction, there were more than enough visitors to fill the casinos' hotel rooms, and it behooved each individual casino to promote the overall "Las Vegas experience" in order to increase the number of visitors to the city. Several brochures from approximately the 1960s show clear evidence of this cooperative promotion by listing the phone numbers of the showrooms of all casinos on the Strip. These brochures also often featured maps labeling not only the casino that produced the brochure but also the others that were available for tourists to visit.

However, the promotional efforts of today's casino corporations solely feature that corporation's casino properties. In the current landscape of oversupply (of hotel rooms, restaurants, and gaming options) and decreased tourist demand, corporate-owned casinos are in fierce competition with each other; it is therefore unsurprising that public relations materials by casino corporations make no mention of properties owned by other corporations. For example, the Pulse of Vegas Blog (<http://lasvegasblog.harrahs.com>) appears to be a tourist-oriented blog about things to do and see in Las Vegas, but it features only hotel-casinos that are owned and operated by Caesars Entertainment (which until recently was known as Harrah's Entertainment).

Today's promotion of corporate casino properties is the culmination of a trend that began in Las Vegas around the Howard Hughes era of the late 1960s. After Hughes purchased the iconic Desert Inn, he went on to own several other properties including the Frontier, Landmark, and the Silver Slipper. Promotional material for these casinos reflects some cross-promotion of the Hughes casinos, with no mention of



other casino properties. A similar promotional strategy was seen in promotional materials for the casinos owned by the Del Webb Corporation, including the Sahara (owned by Del Webb in the 1960s and 1970s) and the Mint.

The increased corporatization of Las Vegas's casinos, seen in an increasing trend since gaming law changes in the 1970s allowed stockholder-owned corporations to own and run casinos, also created the need for increased activity in stockholder relations and financial media relations by gaming corporations. Document archives of modern-day casino corporations, such as the Circus Circus/Mandalay Group, featured an extensive number of press releases targeted to financial media with topics such as quarterly earnings or legal matters. The use of press releases about casino expansion were also important in the era of casino corporatization because they demonstrated the health of the company, encouraging investors to purchase shares of the company. Stockholder-oriented documents, such as annual reports and corporate social responsibility reports, also become more prevalent in the archives of modern casino corporations.

#### The need for differentiation

As the Las Vegas landscape has become more crowded, literally and figuratively, with casinos and other options for visitors (restaurants, shows, spas, etc.), casinos have tried to differentiate their property from the others in hopes of gaining the biggest share of the elusive tourist dollar. Archival promotional materials spanning nearly fifty years show an evolving trend in the ways that casinos attempted to differentiate their properties. Originally, casinos attempted to differentiate based on traditional qualities such as price, convenience, and luxury. The late 1980s through the early 2000s saw the dawning, apex, and eventual decline of Las Vegas's signature element: the elaborate theming of

properties such as the Luxor, which was shaped like an Egyptian pyramid, and Treasure Island, whose pirate theme was carried through in a communiqué that exclaimed, "Attention all privateers, buccaneers, and mutineers!"

Casino properties also attempted to differentiate themselves using more traditional public relations tactics and techniques. Many archives contained extensive press releases highlighting features of the property and its amenities, suggesting that media relations served an important role in this effort to make the casino stand out from its competitors. As will be discussed shortly, Las Vegas casinos have been known for their use of the media-attention-grabbing pseudoevent – Evel Knievel's motorcycle jump of Caesars Palace's fountain in 1967 is one of the most well-known – sometimes to the point of bordering on the Barnum-style hype of the "publicity stunt."

But perhaps the most striking use of public relations – in its more modern conception – is seen in the casinos' efforts to use communication to establish relationships with past customers in hopes of generating repeat business. Casino archives show repeated instances of personal communication with customers that shows efforts to differentiate the casino from its competitors by cultivating a personal relationship through apologies for past experiences, solicitation of suggestions for casino improvements, and promotion of customer-specific deals at the casino. A more contemporary example of the use of relationships to differentiate the casino can be seen in the use of social media to cultivate relationships with followers and fans on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Some casino-hotels are quite active in communication through this medium, while others are not; this participation in social media can potentially serve to set a casino apart from others that

do not communicate with customers in this way.

The casino industry in Las Vegas, with its tendencies toward excess and unusualness, has been a fertile breeding ground for the type of outlandish “publicity stunts” that have historically been incorporated into public relations efforts for certain industries. Las Vegas’s casinos have faced two uphill battles: first, to convince the general public to consider the town as a vacation destination, and later, to encourage patrons to choose their casino property over the growing number of other, similarly equipped facilities. Publicity stunts and other outrageous efforts by these casinos have served to promote both the individual casinos and the overall Las Vegas experience: From the Frontier Hotel-Casino’s sending of an Old West stagecoach to pick up VIP passengers at the airport to the Silver Slipper’s hiring of an airplane to drop promotional materials over the parking lots of competing casinos, these efforts have been intentionally eye-catching. Some, like the Pioneer Club’s acquisition of a downtown lot and repurposing of that land for a public parking lot, have been directed toward both Las Vegas’s visitors and its residents; others, like that same casino’s purchase and public lighting celebration for its iconic “Vegas Vic” sign, were clearly intended to raise Las Vegas’s profile as a tourist destination.

In Las Vegas’s modern era, publicity stunts reached an entirely new level with the 1993 opening of the pirate-themed Treasure Island casino. The casino’s owner, Steve Wynn, planned to demolish the historic Dunes hotel, which he had purchased in order to build his next project, Bellagio. Never one to let an opportunity for publicity be wasted, Wynn arranged for the implosion of the Dunes to coincide with the grand opening of Treasure Island: From a replica pirate ship in front of the new casino, Wynn fired a fake cannon at the same time that crews initiated the demolition of the old one.

This symbolic act drew the attention of nearly 300 reporters, and at least momentarily, the eyes of the nation were fixed on this metaphoric “out with the old, and in with the new gesture” that characterized Las Vegas’s building boom of the 1990s. Wynn also broke new ground in promotion when he purchased one hour of prime time programming on NBC (at an approximate price of \$1.7 million) to air a program he produced, “Treasure Island: The Adventure Begins,” which prominently featured his new casino. This sort of revolutionary “adverprogram,” coming long before product placement became an accepted norm, introduced Wynn’s casino – as well as the city of Las Vegas – into thousands of homes across the nation.

As Las Vegas expanded exponentially through the 1990s and into the 2000s, it struggled to keep the attention of the nation with a series of increasingly elaborate, orchestrated events. Grand openings of new casinos became star-studded affairs, and demolitions of old properties were exploited for attention wherever possible. Documents from the 1996 opening of the Monte Carlo casino and the 1999 opening of the Mandalay Bay casino show the efforts taken to ensure the attendance of celebrities, including entertainers and athletes, at the grand opening weekend. Rooms were complimentary, lavish meals were provided, and a red-carpet event ensured that media captured the entire event on film. Of course, the use of celebrities to promote Las Vegas dates back to the opening of the Flamingo in 1946; however, the pace at which these new casinos opened led these star-studded events to become almost commonplace, possibly diminishing their effectiveness in attracting attention.

Casinos also tried to attract attention by using media relations to place stories in national, local, and tourist publications. Press releases were sometimes used to attract attention through appealing to

traditional news values such as accentuating celebrity (prominence), newness, or unusualness. Archives for a number of different casinos reflected a fairly consistent selection of press release topics, including expansion or new facilities, entertainment in the form of shows and special events, personnel changes at the managerial level, and jackpots won by casino patrons.

As more casinos put resources into public relations and press releases became increasingly common, casinos turned to different angles in attempting to stand out and earn a coveted media placement. Press releases began to promote human interest stories, such as the personal stories of performers in the casino's shows, or use photos to show jackpot winners and casino facilities. The eventual increase in competition for press coverage lead casinos to explore the use of alternatives for communication through the mass media, including the use of some early advertorials, dating back to the 1980s, in addition to the aforementioned "adverprogram" in 1994.

Competition among casinos also spurred a trend in which promotional materials became more elaborate in order to attract interest from customers and journalists. Press kits in the shape of Luxor's iconic pyramid and Excalibur's ornately detailed castle contained information about new casinos and attempted to promote existing casinos in new and different ways. Although advances in printing technology enabled the casinos to produce oddly shaped and elaborate printed collateral, the cost of these was likely still significant.

#### Casino use of public relations agencies

Although records detailing these casinos' use of the services of public relations agencies is sparse, there is some indication that elements of the casinos' public relations activities, such as the production of press kits and press releases, was occasionally outsourced to agencies. There is some evidence as early as the 1980s that

big events, such as grand openings, were promoted by external public relations agencies. However, the use of agencies became much more prevalent in the 1990s and beyond.

These agencies were primarily contracted for technician duties such as writing press releases and distributing press kits. Archival records provide some indication that casinos retained control of the content and directed the larger strategy for the casino's public relations. Over time, the public relations duties for most casinos were consolidated under corporate auspices. Most of the public relations for today's casinos is conducted by these corporate offices or outsourced to outside agencies.

#### Publications and other direct-to-consumer communication

Casinos' efforts to communicate directly to consumers began in the form of magazines with a variety of content related to the property. These magazines, which were ostensibly sent to past guests of the hotel, featured stories and pictures about events at the property, celebrity visits to the casino, personnel news about promotions and new employees, and upcoming shows and entertainment at the casino's venue. These publications, often around 10-12 pages in length, were at times very personal, reflecting a similarly personal relationship with the hotel's guests.

Over time, these magazines simplified into shorter publications, often in newsletter format. By the 1980s, these newsletter communications were in a simpler brochure format and often emphasized bargains and special promotions at the casino. Likely due to changes in printing technology, they were usually printed in color. They were also sent to a wider audience, usually the casino's entire roster of members for its

players club\*, and were less personal than the direct-to-consumer communication of the early Las Vegas casinos.

As an evolution of the direct-to-consumer communication previously carried out over printed publications and other controlled media, today's Las Vegas casinos have turned to social media such as Twitter and Facebook. This communication medium allows the casinos the valuable ability to connect with not only past customers (in hopes of generating repeat business) but also potential new customers for the casino. Social media allow these casinos the ability to differentiate themselves by establishing a brand personality and also allow them to provide customer service through this medium, further establishing relationships with current and past customers.

#### Limitations and Future Research

As mentioned previously, this research was primarily limited by two factors: the incomplete nature of the casino public relations archive in the Gaming Collection at the UNLV Special Collections Library and the relatively short amount of time (one week) the researcher was afforded in which to do this research. As such, this research focuses primarily on identifying industry-wide trends rather than providing thorough analysis of individual collateral material available in the casino archives. Several of the casinos' archives were more complete than others, and these might provide for fruitful further research that delves more deeply into one casino's efforts to promote its product using public relations.

There is a great deal more to be learned about the history of public relations in Las

---

\* As early as the 1970s, casinos developed "players clubs" to collect customers' information and track their play at the casino. These clubs were often used to issue complimentary food, beverage, and rooms ("comps") to high-dollar gamblers, but the contact information collected through the signups became another way for casinos to communicate directly with customers.

Vegas beyond what can be found in the Gaming Collection archives. A more complete history of the industry would require additional research methods, such as oral histories, to draw information from a wider variety of sources. In fact, this would be an excellent time to undertake such an endeavor: As a relatively young city, many of the pivotal figures in Las Vegas's public relations history, even from its early days, are still involved in the industry.

Because media relations was an important component of these casinos' efforts to promote themselves, both to local and national audiences, additional research on newspaper coverage of the casino industry might reveal more about the way that news media helped (and harmed) these casinos in their quest to productively use media relations as a public relations tactic. Additional research could also be conducted on communication with specific stakeholder publics that are traditional to the industry in addition to the media, such as employees and investors. The use of public relations for the nascent casino corporations, which emerged into prominence in the 1980s and 1990s and grew larger through the 2000s, may provide some interesting history on how the investor relations aspect of this industry evolved out of nonexistence.

#### Conclusions

The use of public relations by Las Vegas casinos has changed over time in a number of ways, some that are similar to larger trends in the evolution of the field, and others that are specific to the gaming industry and the city of Las Vegas. Although this research is industry-specific and limited to the city of Las Vegas, it can still serve to provide context for contemporary study of public relations. For instance, the strong trend toward direct-to-consumer communication, as seen in the building and maintenance of personal relationships and the use of publications, continues in today's

use by these casinos of social media technologies such as Twitter and Facebook.

The casino industry of Las Vegas, NV provides a unique context in which to study the history of public relations, and demonstrates the value of focusing on an industry-specific history of the profession. While some trends in casino public relations, such as the employment of public relations agencies or the use of media relations to generate attention, mirror larger trends in the field of public relations, others — like the frequent use of P. T. Barnum-style “publicity stunts” — seem to be unique to this industry. Other industry-specific histories of public relations might uncover more nuanced practices that are common to one industry but uncommon to the practice of public relations at large.

This study of public relations in the Las Vegas casino industry has also revealed some interesting findings that supplement the existing history of this notorious town. For instance, few who are familiar with the hyper-competition between today’s gaming conglomerates would imagine an era where independently owned casinos would

promote other casino properties. However, early brochures from casino-hotels such as the Dunes and Circus Circus show that this practice was commonplace. The gracious cross-promotion, without any direct financial benefit, by casinos of other properties speaks to a bygone era where independently owned properties worked together to promote a larger product — the Las Vegas experience.

#### About the Author

Jessalynn R. Strauss is an assistant professor in the Department of Communications Arts at the Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

*This paper was published June 2012 as the eighteenth in the UNLV Center for Gaming Research’s Occasional Paper Series, accessible online at <http://gaming.unlv.edu>.*

## Works Cited

- Binkley, C. (2008). *Winner takes all: Steve Wynn, Kirk Kerkorian, Gary Loveman, and the race to own Las Vegas*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books.
- Callison, C. (2003). Media relations and the Internet: how Fortune 500 company web sites assist journalists in news gathering. *Public Relations Review*, 29, 29-41.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M. (2006). *Effective public relations* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Dumenco, S. (2010, September 13). RIP, the press release (1906-2010) — and long live the tweet: When it comes to pithy spin, should marketers be taking their cues from the celebrity-industrial complex? *Ad Age*. Retrieved from <http://www.adage.com>
- Ferrari, M., & Ives, S. (2005). *Las Vegas: An unconventional history*. Boston, MA: Bulfinch Books.
- Hoy, P., Raaz, O., & Wehmeier, S. (2007). From facts to stories or from stories to facts? Analyzing public relations history in public relations textbooks. *Public Relations Review*, 33, 191-200.
- Gottdiener, M., Collins, C. C., & Dickens, D. R. (1999). *Las Vegas: The social production of an all-American city*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hashimoto, K. (2008). *Casino marketing: A strategic approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hill, L. N., & White, C. (2000). Public relations practitioners' perception of the World Wide Web as a communications tool. *Public Relations Review*, 26(1), 31-51.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), 321-334.
- Land, B., & Land, M. (1999). *A short history of Las Vegas*. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press.
- O'Brien, T. L. (2005, February 13). Spinning frenzy: P.R.'s bad press. *New York Times*. Retrieved online May 28, 2012 from Lexis-Nexis Academic.
- Rothman, H. (2002). *Neon metropolis: How Las Vegas started the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schwartz, D. G. (2010, March 3). Tweets connecting casinos with potential customers. *Vegas Seven*. Retrieved from <http://www.weeklyseven.com>

Schwartz, D. G. (2003). *Suburban Xanadu: The casino resort on the Las Vegas Strip and beyond*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Seitel, F. P. (2004). *The practice of public relations* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Smith, J. L. (2005). *Sharks in the desert: The founding fathers and current kings of Las Vegas*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books.

Stein, J. (2009, August 14). Less Vegas: The casino town bets on a comeback. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com>

Wilcox, D. L., & Cameron, G. T. (2006). *Public relations: Strategies and tactics* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

About the Center for Gaming Research

Located within Special Collections at UNLV's state-of-the-art Lied Library, the Center for Gaming Research is committed to providing support for scholarly inquiry into all aspects of gaming. Through its website, <http://gaming.unlv.edu>, the Center offers several unique research tools and information sources.

About the University of Nevada, Las Vegas

UNLV is a doctoral-degree-granting institution of 28,000 students and 3,300 faculty and staff. Founded in 1957, the university offers more than 220 undergraduate, masters and doctoral degree programs. UNLV is located on a 332-acre campus in dynamic Southern Nevada and is classified in the category of Research Universities (high research activity) by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

UNLV