

Gaming executives told how to survive new smoking ban

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Good customer communication, a gradual phase-out of indoor smoking, and installing decent outdoor smoking areas -- these were just a few suggestions given by national and international executives this week on how to prepare for future smoking bans in areas such as restaurants and bars that border casino floors.

"The most important thing is for your customers to have the very best facilities," Chris Downy, executive director of the Australian Casino Association, told a room-full of gaming professionals.

The panel discussion on the economic effects of smoking bans focused on what businesses, mostly casinos, could do to mitigate possible effects. The discussion came on the heels of Nevadans' passage of Question 5, which bans smoking in all public buildings and workplaces in the state with the exception of casino floors and bars that don't serve food.

Smoking bans in Australia are similar to those in Nevada -- all public buildings and workplaces are off limits, but there is an exemption for casino floors.

Downy, who was attending the Global Gaming Expo at the Las Vegas Convention Center, said Australian casinos had to build smoking balconies, use advertisements to alert its smoking customers of the law and install directional signs identifying smoking and nonsmoking areas.

Restaurants and bars have implemented similar changes, he said.

In Ontario, Canada, casinos are dealing with a deeper issue.

Under the Smoke-Free Act of Ontario, smoking is banned in all entertainment venues, including casinos and bingo halls. Much like the refurbishing occurring in Australian casinos to accommodate smoking patrons, Ontario casinos are adding balconies and outdoor patio areas for smokers, said Karl Gagesch, vice president of development for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation.

Ontario's law, enacted in May, allows smoking in outdoor shelters or patios with a roof but with no more than two walls.

To stay within the law, Ontario casinos are fencing in the patio areas and installing heating lamps to keep customers comfortable.

These smoking patios and balconies close to gaming floors and have no direct access out of the casino, Gagesch said.

"We didn't want our customers to use the smoke break as a reason to leave," he said.

Though Gagesch couldn't say what, if any, financial impact the smoking ban has had -- the law is only five months old -- casinos had expected a loss of about 10 to 20 percent of its U.S. patrons to New York and Michigan casinos that permit smoking.

But, he said, the industry is confident customers will return.

Karen Blumenfeld, director of the Policy and Legal Resource Center for New Jersey Groups Against Smoking Pollution, also attended Tuesday's panel. She said she was pleasantly surprised by the industry's willingness to discuss the issue and that the topic wasn't dominated by concerns over potential loss of revenue and customers.

New Jersey enacted smoking bans similar to Nevada's in April. Casinos with 150 or more stand-alone slot machines, 10 table games, or some combination of the two, are exempt from the law.

The gaming industry did fear revenue would suffer, Blumenfeld said. And though there is still some animosity as a result of the smoking bans, she said, restaurants and bars are complying with the law and making accommodations, such as outdoor patio seating for their smoking customers. Casinos, on the other hand, are a little behind.

"The transition was very smooth, partly because neighboring states were already smoke free," she said. "However, there's not one casino in Atlantic City that's 100-percent compliant. When we did a smoke study in these casino, smokers were found in the nonsmoking areas."

She said health departments in New Jersey are working with businesses to help them with the transition.

Still, she said, there is a bill in New Jersey that proposes an outright ban on smoking on casino floors.