



Turning On in Atlantic City

An Interview with Jeffrey Vasser, Executive Director, Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority (ACCVA)



EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming his current position in April 2002, Jeffrey Vasser served as CFO of Cipriani SA and as a senior consultant for Deloitte & Touche's public-sector gaming and entertainment group. Previously, he served in a variety of roles with major hospitality companies, including Choice Hotels International, Laventhol & Horwath, and Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts. Vasser holds a B.S. in casino management from Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration and a master of public administration degree in public finance from the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.



Jeffrey Vasser

INSTITUTION BRIEF Established in 1982, the Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority is Atlantic City's principal marketing body, aimed at stimulating economic growth through the promotion of convention business and tourism development. With seven board members appointed by the governor of New Jersey, the authority controlled an operating budget of approximately \$31.7 million in 2002.

How will your new marketing slogan – "Atlantic City: Always Turned On" – promote a better understanding of the city among the general public?

When I joined the ACCVA in April 2002, I had a gut feeling that the previous slogan – "America's Favorite Playground" – wasn't resonating with our market any longer. So we started conducting research to test new concepts. We worked with focus groups in New York, Boston, and Cincinnati, and made almost 700 phone calls to individuals in our market demographic. The ACCVA also brought together 100 people from the Atlantic City community to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the business environment. Then, as a smaller group, we put together some creative messaging that spoke to our strengths.

Out of five potential concepts, we chose "Atlantic City: Always Turned On."

We felt that message would appeal to sophisticated, affluent adults, and that it accurately reflected the energy and excitement that is currently running through Atlantic City. The city is experiencing a renaissance, and, for the first time, this wave of development is not exclusively concerned with casino rooms. In the next few months, we will have opened about 850,000 square feet of new retail, dining, and entertainment space. For instance, Park Place Entertainment is renovating the Ocean One Mall on the boardwalk. The new mall will be reminiscent of the Forum Shops in Las Vegas, which is also a Park Place Entertainment project.

Ultimately, we believe that there is some pent-up demand for a more upscale Atlantic City. Before the Borgata opened, we weren't providing a very upscale product. Then, when the Borgata opened, we realized that people were willing to trade up in Atlantic City – to high-end restaurants, more luxurious accommodations, and better retail outlets.

How will you spread the message?

With a budget of \$500,000 for the first year, we are running a public-relations campaign in conjunction with the South New Jersey Transportation Authority. We chose to run a PR campaign for two reasons. First, with our budget of \$500,000, we couldn't make a significant impact through an advertising campaign in our region. However, with that budget we could run a very strong PR campaign.

Second, we are trying to change people's perceptions of Atlantic City, and changing perceptions is one of the functions of PR. We have to get the word out that this is not the Atlantic City of old. People are walking around with 20-year-old perceptions of the city, and those are simply no longer true. For instance, there was once a housing project at the entrance of the city. That has been knocked down, and now the Walk – 325,000 square feet of brightly lit, pedestrian-friendly shopping and dining space – is in its place. In fact, 30

percent of the housing stock in Atlantic City has been replaced over the past six years by the CRDA [Casino Reinvestment Development Authority], the organization that reinvests casino revenues into public-improvement projects. These projects, in addition to the Borgata, the upscale retail outlets, and the golf courses in the area, will help people to see Atlantic City's new face.

For many people, the gaming industry doesn't have the best connotations, although it employs a great number of people and contributes to the overall economy. Does the industry do an effective job of promoting itself?

We can always do better. That said, in Southern New Jersey, people are well aware that this industry is the engine of the region, and other state governments are also taking note. Indeed, many states, as they face budget crises, are examining the opportunities for incremental revenue from legalized or expanded gaming bases. It took a little while for us to get it right, but in the end, Atlantic City is a positive experiment in gaming.

What motivated you to step into this role in April 2002?

The timing couldn't have been better. By the second quarter of 2004, we will have added 25 percent to our casino-room supply, which will in turn encourage convention business. Additionally, Delta Airlines has announced direct service to Atlantic City from its second-largest hub in the country, Cincinnati. That will open up the midwestern and western United States to Atlantic City. The Atlantic City Convention Center is also poised to take off, and the state recently finished a \$100-million renovation of Boardwalk Hall, which has hosted concerts by Bruce Springsteen, Paul McCartney, Cher, and Simon and Garfunkel. The names don't get any bigger than that, and Atlantic City can now rightfully market itself as a full-service destination for gaming, shopping, dining, and entertainment. Finally, the CRDA, Senator William Gormley, and Governor James McGreevey are all committed to the city. Given all of these developments, it was just a great time to work for Atlantic City. ●