

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

Taking Care of the Customer

An Interview with James A. Rigot,
General Manager, Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino



EDITORS' NOTE James Rigot has been General Manager of Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino since September 2005. Prior to this appointment, Rigot served as Vice President of Table Games at the Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa. In addition to his table games leadership positions with Harrah's properties, he opened Trump Plaza as Casino Shift Manager in 1984, and after service as Vice President of Table Games for Tropicana Casino and Resort, he returned to Trump Plaza as Executive Vice President of Casino Operations from 1994 to 1999. In addition, he has held senior management positions at other premier casino properties, including the Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut.



James A. Rigot

PROPERTY BRIEF Towering 39 stories above the world-famous Boardwalk, Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino (www.trumpplaza.com) in Atlantic City, New Jersey, delivers a first-class experience. The property offers irresistible restaurants, great entertainment, exhilarating nightlife, a spa, a beach bar, and an extensive casino floor. Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino is owned and operated by Trump Entertainment Resorts, Inc., a leading gaming company that owns and operates two additional properties: Trump Taj Mahal Casino Hotel, also located on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, and Trump Marina Hotel and Casino, located in Atlantic City's Marina District.

How much of an impact has the economic environment had on the business, and how challenging is it to find growth?

From 1978, when the first casino appeared on the scene, we've had growth in Atlantic City year over year with the exception of 2007, when the challenges began. But it wasn't all economy related. Atlantic City has competition. Recently, Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware legalized slots, which have been Atlantic City's main revenue source as far as it relates to casino gaming. In addition, Atlantic City is feeling the impact of the housing slump. We saw a major decrease because of the September stock crash. Consumer confidence has dwindled, and people are concerned. September 2008 is the worst month on record since the inception of gaming in Atlantic City. This is the second year we're going to realize a decrease since our inception.

There's no question in my mind that we're in a recession. I'd like to believe that we're near the bottom, and I'm confident that the new measures coming out of Washington will have a positive impact on the economy, although it's going to take time. It's important that we understand our immediate and long-term challenges and opportunities, and right now we are in survival mode.

Are there areas where you can be proactive to keep occupancy up? How have you adjusted the way you operate the business?

For the longest time, we've been mindful of our rate, and we have attempted to maintain our rate integrity. We are doing our best to attract patrons to the hotel. An unoccupied room that could net out at least \$1 of profit is a lost opportunity. We're prepared now to forgo margin to get people here. We're trying to control the things we can. As far as capital spending, we're going to hold off for the time being until we get more clarity on the future economic turnaround. Our focus is on cash preservation and our balance sheet.

The Trump name is linked with several properties. Is there coordination between those properties?

There is. About three years ago, we developed a number of business strategies and initiatives. The focus was to improve customer service and to further train our employees to engage in taking care of the customer. Another initiative was to upgrade the properties and our facilities. Our final initiative was using technology to improve efficiency and the overall customer experience, with the Trump One card system. For instance, prior to this marketing undertaking, customers were only rewarded at the property at which they played: Trump Plaza, Taj Mahal, or Trump Marina. Now customers who patronize any of our Atlantic City casinos can

earn benefits with the Trump One Card system and use them at any of the three properties. We have also coordinated our rates and promotional offers at the three properties. Customers who are Trump One Card members can now enjoy the benefits and amenities of each of the Trump Atlantic City casinos.

Atlantic City is much different today than it was not so long ago. Is there an understanding in the market of what Atlantic City offers?

I think people are becoming more aware. All of the Atlantic City operators have recognized that we need to transform ourselves into a destination resort, much like Las Vegas. Atlantic City is now ranked fourth in the United States as a destination resort. Within 350 miles, we have a population of almost 50 million people who can travel here on a tank of gas. We have things in Atlantic City that no one can duplicate. We have the beautiful Atlantic Ocean and four miles of exciting boardwalk. A lot of people, especially in the summertime, think about Atlantic City. It has a lot more to offer than just slot machines.

How has the role of general manager changed or evolved, and do you need to be more of a generalist today?

I do have to be a generalist. My job is to get everybody on the same page, working together to accomplish goals and produce positive results. I am responsible for the overall strategic planning and direction of the property. I consider myself an optimist, but I'm also a realist. It is critical to be a good communicator, especially in these times, because within the employee population, there's a lot of anxiety. Part of my job is to be visible, approachable, and willing to listen to the employees' issues. I try my best to convey pertinent information and project a positive attitude in the hope of alleviating employee concerns. Employees can't work enthusiastically in a vacuum. ●



The Trump Plaza Casino (top, right); The sign that welcomes you to the Trump experience (above, left)