



Indian Gaming and Beyond: What Does the Future Have in Store?

by Valerie Spicer

Soon our country will be voting on the next president of the United States. What future do we envision with the incoming administration, whether they be Democrat or Republican? The direction that the U.S. Department of Interior will take with regard to Land Into Trust, or the position on what is encompassed in compacts, could shift significantly with a change in political party.

For example, we know from past hearings that Donald Trump has a skewed and competitive view on Indian gaming. In 1993, Trump testified before a House subcommittee that, “the mafia was running rampant in Native American gaming casinos.” What influence would this perspective have on a Congress under Trump, as President? Conversely, Hillary Clinton has not always been a supporter of gaming expansion. However, she has reaffirmed her support for tribal sovereignty and her respect for the government-to-government relationships.

A Seat at the Table

Regardless of the outcome, there’s potential for Indian gaming to undergo significant changes over the next four years, and we need to ensure tribes have a vocal and visible presence at the local, state and federal levels.

Tribes have historically engaged in the political process and are as statesmanlike as their ancestors who regularly visited Washington, D.C. With the advent of Indian gaming, tribes now have the economic positioning to claim an audience with each new administration to advance the issues important to our industry and our enterprises.

That is why election years are also a great time to take stock of the future and to look ahead to see what’s on the horizon. For example, what impact will fantasy sports have as states like New York legalize and regulate online wagers? Other online environments like e-sports, apps and virtual reality may also significantly change our business landscape.

At AIGA, we are looking ahead to what’s in store for Indian gaming and the exciting advancements just around the corner. We are also advocating for a whole new level of due diligence surrounding these opportunities.

Measuring the Potential

Tribal leaders are watching these issues unfold and are having discussions about how to advance with the changing technology. What role do we want to play in fantasy sports, online gaming and the like? At its core, this is a business decision and we need to figure out how best to measure the potential and the possible return on investment for tribal enterprises.

Our objective as an association is to gather data and information for our leadership to make informed decisions. Decisions not only on the offerings themselves, but also on the

value of including or not including these offerings in the makeup of their compact now and for the future.

As we think about diversifying gaming, we will look at the value from a cross-marketing purpose, and/or as an enhancement to existing offerings. We also need to consider where gamification strategies fit in to this mix, and the value of building social environments for the difficult-to-capture millennial audience.

The advancement of discussions on e-sports and sports wagering has made its way to the halls of Congress and major conferences. Much like the initial discussions on Internet gaming, tribes find themselves on a very competitive playing field with national commercial interests. It is critical that we engage in the conversations and determine our degree of interest now.

Encompassed in these important issues are potential changes to the complex landscape of individual tribal-state compacts and agreements, as well as regulatory questions that borderless digital environments create. Bottom line, there’s a level of due diligence needed to run the numbers and see how each new technology and business diversification opportunity will benefit a tribal enterprise.

Exciting Opportunities on the Horizon

Rather than viewing these changes to our industry as hurdles to overcome, we see them as exciting business opportunities on the horizon for AIGA member tribes and tribes throughout the country. In fact, this is a watershed moment in Indian gaming history. We have the resources, information, education and motivation to bring our enterprises to a whole new level.

A question we hear more and more at AIGA meetings, NIGA conferences and regional gaming shows is, “What are we doing to advance the enterprise structure as a whole?” With casinos, real estate holdings, restaurants, hotels, banks, retail centers, and more, enterprise structures have become highly complex entities.

As we move at lightning speed to diversify, grow and prosper, we don’t want to lose sight of the big-picture and how to position ourselves for the next phase. Are enterprises maximizing buying power, human resources, funding sources and community partnerships? Equipping the diversified tribal enterprises for success in the future will take some serious strategic planning, and that’s some of the exciting discussion for the AIGA Expo.

Gaming has been a critical tool to strengthen governments, and tribes have maximized its strengths. Now is the time for innovative thinking and for looking far beyond our current horizons. Our windshield has become vastly larger than our rearview mirror. ♣

Valerie Spicer is Executive Director of the Arizona Indian Gaming Association. She can be reached by calling (480) 284-4034 or email valerie.spicer@azindiangaming.org.