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## Effective Billboard Design

Virtually all casinos rely on outdoor advertising to communicate with their existing and prospective customers. This mode of communication, in the form of traditional “bulletin” style and “30-sheet” rotator billboards, has been embraced by gaming operations for decades. Casinos in competitive markets seek the best locations and in turn, bid up the price of available boards. Billboards are often purchased deep inside secondary competitors’ markets and in markets that are far beyond logical market definitions. In fact, the hunt for available outdoor space often takes casino marketers outside of their traditional markets and into regions where they cannot hope to penetrate.

Outdoor advertising is also expensive, often comprising up to one third of a casino’s advertising placement budget. Yet despite these high costs, casinos continue to rent outdoor space in illogical locations, deliver messages that are not salient to drive-by traffic and create murals that are often illegible or unreadable. Much of the outdoor advertising that casinos employ is simply ineffective.

### How Casinos Came to Rely on Billboards

In order to better understand the role that outdoor advertising should play in a casino’s overall communication strategy, it is important to understand how casinos came to rely on billboards. Prior to the recent expansion of Indian casinos, casinos in Nevada and Atlantic City were banned from communicating gaming messages on television and radio. The Federal Communications Commission had for years deemed gaming advertising inappropriate and prohibited casinos from advertising gaming on the airwaves. In order to reach prospective customers in-bound to Las Vegas, Reno and Atlantic City, casino marketers utilized billboards to deliver their gaming messages. As gaming expanded in the 1990’s, a new generation of marketers continued this strategy, purchasing outdoor locations along traffic corridors leading to gaming districts. Billboard vendors responded by constructing hundreds of new structures in order to accommodate demand from gaming operators.

In the mid 1990’s a series of legal decisions in the federal courts allowed casinos to finally advertise gaming messages on television and radio. Today, casinos throughout the United States are free to utilize the full arsenal of advertising mediums in order to reach their intended markets. However, the industry’s over-reliance on outdoor advertising remains – not because of any empirical data that indicates billboard advertising is more effective than others, but because it is the way it has always been done.

### The Problem with Billboards

Of all forms of advertising, designing an effective outdoor campaign is perhaps the most difficult. Most billboards are hard to read. Billboards, by design, are used to attract the attention of people who are driving in automobiles, often at a high rate of speed. A well placed billboard may be in a driver’s field of vision for no more than five seconds. A poorly located billboard commands less attention. Regardless, many casinos attempt to cram as many words as possible onto their billboards in order to deliver multiple messages. In addition to advertising a current promotion, casinos will include driving directions as well as the full name of the property. If there is not enough room for all these words, designers will often employ extensions in order to include more words on the billboard. The result is a billboard that is devoid of strategy, illegible and ultimately ineffective.

### Steps to Effective Outdoor Design

Define Outdoor Objectives. As in any marketing campaign, the first step is to define marketing objectives. What does the casino want its outdoor campaign to achieve? Is the campaign’s purpose to promote an upcoming headline act, advertise an upcoming promotion, provide directions to the property or support a broader branding campaign? Invariably, many casino marketers attempt to achieve multiple objectives and wind up cluttering billboards with numerous messages. Keep outdoor objectives focused and everything else will fall into place.

Formulate an Outdoor Strategy. With clearly defined objectives, the casino marketer can then formulate a strategy to achieve those objectives. An outdoor strategy explains how the objectives will be achieved. If the objective is to guide prospective customers to the casino, then the marketer can define a strategy and pick specific locations that direct customers from specific feeder markets to the casino through a series of directional billboards. Each billboard guides the customer to the property, assuring them that they are on the right path. Sometimes, as the marketer goes through the exercise of strategy formulation, he/she may discover that an outdoor campaign is an inappropriate form of communication to achieve overall marketing objectives. In that case, the outdoor campaign should be abandoned rather than waste marketing dollars on an inappropriate medium.

**Make a Logo that Works.** There are few things more sacred to a casino's leadership than the property's logo. A lot of thought and debate has gone into the design of most casino logos. In Indian casinos, tribal leadership often participates in its design. However, many casino logos are ill-suited for outdoor applications. They may be unreadable at a distance or contain too many words. A logo that reads, "XXX Casino, Resort, Hotel and Conference Center" will probably not work in an outdoor application. "XXX Casino" would be far more effective and the logo may need to be modified to accommodate this. As a word of caution, any attempt to change or modify the logo may cause a certain amount of resistance from principals in the gaming organization or tribal leadership. Their approval is necessary before alterations to the logo are made.

**Develop the Message.** The single most challenging aspect of designing an effective outdoor campaign is developing a concise message. As a rule of thumb, the marketer should limit the outdoor message to five words, excluding the property logo. In rare occasions, or where the billboard is located at or near a traffic signal, the marketer may opt to develop a message that is seven words long. Any longer and the message's effectiveness will be dramatically lessened.


**Does it Look Right?** Prior to the actual production of the billboard, a graphic designer will prepare an illustration of the proposed billboard. This illustration is a scaled down version of the actual billboard and will contain the fonts, colors and images that will ultimately appear on the billboard. Often, this illustration will highlight problems with the design that will determine the ultimate success or failure of the billboard campaign. It is at this point that casino and tribal leadership can determine if the billboard will work. If for any reason, the illustration fails to effectively communicate the message, do not go any further in the production process. If the billboard does not work from three feet away, it will not work from fifty feet away.

**Budget for Periodic Changes.** Even the most successful outdoor campaign requires periodic updates. Billboards are exposed to extreme weather conditions. Ultra violet light also takes its toll on the physical properties of billboards and causes them to fade. A weathered billboard is a reflection of the condition of the casino property. Passersby who see a faded or torn billboard may infer that the casino will look similar and will forego a visit. Billboards also

become invisible to people who drive the same route day in and day out. As such, billboards need to be changed out frequently, both to keep them fresh and to catch the eye of frequent travelers. As a rule of thumb, a billboard must be changed out no less than once every six months.

Outdoor advertising is an important form of communication for any gaming enterprise. However, casinos tend to over-rely on outdoor advertising to deliver messages that may be more effectively delivered through other mediums. Like radio, television and print media, outdoor advertising is only one tool in the marketer's tool chest. As in any marketing endeavor, outdoor advertising stands the greatest chance of success if it is rooted in achievable objectives, sound strategy and effective implementation. ♣


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