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Las Vegas casinos gamble their reputations on sustainability

Las Vegas, the city so lit up that some astronauts report its famous central strip is the [brightest spot on earth](#), is trying to change course. The neon lights of its early years are being [replaced by LED screens](#) and the casinos and hotels are cutting their energy and water use.

Now, some of Vegas's biggest businesses including Caesars Entertainment Corporation and MGM Resorts International are trying to get in on the act and prove that they can be both sustainability leaders and good corporate citizens.

But when their core business model rests on gambling, with all the social problems this entails from addiction to poverty, are these negative impacts a necessary trade off?

At Caesars, they repurpose everything from soaps to curtains to dice and cards. Used soap is collected by the guest room attendants and melted down to create new soaps to be handed to people in need in places like Guatemala and the Philippines. Pillowcases and old towels are repurposed for cleaning rags and a few years back, old curtains repurposed for tote bags were sold for charity.

The efforts to be a socially responsible company don't stop there. Customers on the casino floor drink wine pumped from kegs instead of

bottles. Lights and air conditioning in unoccupied rooms remain off. The vending machines in the back of the house have lights turned off, which saves about \$25,000 a year, according to the company.

People don't come to Vegas to recycle. They come to gamble. That's why at Caesars all the garbage goes to one place - the docks that are at the same level as the casino floor. There, a team from [Renu Oil](#) sorts all the garbage into recyclable and non-recyclable.

"It's just another way to make sustainability and efficiency easier on our guests so they don't have to think about it too much," said Eric Dominguez, corporate director of energy and environmental services.

"If you stop guests and ask if they know that we recycle, they probably feel good about it and not mind it. But if we ask them to start throwing stuff into the recycling bin, they may or may not do it."

Getting on top of gambling

Gambling, the main reason why people visit [Las Vegas](#), is what some critics - particularly those in the anti-gambling industry - say prevents these companies from being truly sustainable businesses. Can a company be called a socially responsible business if gambling is an integral part of its business model?

"The entire business of predatory gambling is based upon getting people to be irresponsible," said Les Bernal, national director at Stop predatory [Gambling](#). "From a big picture stand point, casinos produce one thing: inequality. If their business is based on producing inequality, it's impossible to also be a company that does social good."

Anti-gambling advocates like Bernal are particularly concerned about the inequality that gambling establishments create in the communities where they operate. In 2010, [William Epstein and William Thompson](#), professors at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, reported that an average adult who lives in Vegas gambles away about \$1,511 a year while average American loses just about \$391 a year.

“Gaming is a vice for many people and it is a reasonable social question whether it should be permitted or not,” said [Gregory C Unruh](#), professor of values leadership at George Mason University and an expert on sustainable business strategy.

Those working in the gaming industry insist that Americans believe gambling addictions to be much more prevalent than they actually are. The Nation Gambling Impact Study Commission survey found just 0.6% of US adults are pathological gamblers and 1.6% of US adults are problem gamblers. The numbers are a bit higher locally. In Las Vegas, 3.5% of adults were pathological gamblers and 2.9% were problem gamblers.

In 2013, Americans lost [\\$119bn to gambling](#), the majority of it in casinos.

Being a socially responsible business doesn't stop with environment, it extends to the wellbeing of society. Yet what would happen if the Vegas strip were to turn off its lights and shut down the slots? Fewer people would probably lose money, but thousands of people would end up without jobs.

But for Bernal, the jobs created by the gaming industry don't outweigh the costs, especially the number of gambling addicts created.

“This is a business model that creates way more addicts and harms thousands and thousands more people than it employs, than the people that work there,” he said.

Socially responsible gambling

The Vegas strip isn't going anywhere. Neither are the lights or the slots. The problem gamblers, however, are another story, at least according to the companies.

To address the potential effects of its business on local communities and the US population overall, as far back as twenty years

ago, [Caesars](#) implemented responsible gambling programs across their properties. MGM also has a similar program.

As part of the responsible gaming initiative, staff are trained in how to prevent underage gaming and handle unattended minors in the casinos. The companies also actively promote responsible service of alcohol and encourage their customers not to gamble when drunk or depressed. Both MGM and Caesars have brochures throughout their properties, neatly tucked into displays in places like front desk or elsewhere in the hotel.

There are the brochures on knowing when to stop. Then there are those educating potential gamblers about house advantage and the odds they face while on the casino floor. At the core of the responsible gambling initiatives are self-exclusion lists. Gamblers can exclude themselves from any casino marketing and promotions and basically put themselves on the no-gambling list.

Anti-gambling advocates are sceptical. “Roughly 95% of people who are problem gamblers never come forward for help,” said Bernal, pointing out that those on the self-exclusion lists are just the tip of the iceberg. “The concept of responsible gambling is nothing more than a public relations message.”

“From a business perspective,” adds Unruh, “when your sustainability performance indicator only improves the less customers use your product - drink less, smoke less, wager less - you are in a dubious position.”