



Up Close with Dan Savage, Slot Operations Director – Northern Quest Resort & Casino

Dan Savage is Slot Operations Director at Northern Quest Resort & Casino in Airway Heights, WA, where he was instrumental in the property's overhaul of its slot floor. With over forty years of experience in the gaming industry, Savage's insights helped make Northern Quest's slot offerings more profitable, even during the nation's economic downturn. Indian Gaming magazine recently spoke with Savage about his career in gaming, his perspective on slot floor design, and how to keep the slot floor exciting for guests.

Tell us about your background in the gaming industry and when you first entered tribal gaming?

In gaming in general, I started out in 1969 with Del Webb Corporation as a change attendant and I worked my way up to assistant manager there. I opened up my first casino as slot manager in 1978 at Park Tahoe – that property was later changed to Caesar's Tahoe and now it's called MontBleu. I began in Indian gaming in 1995. I opened up the Chinook Winds in Lincoln City, Oregon and I still go there once in a while just to visit.

What have been the most exciting technological advances you've witnessed during your career?

There have been several. When I first started the industry consisted predominantly of old, mechanical one-coin machines. Then Bally introduced the multiple-coin machine, which was revolutionary at the time. Then came the hopper game, which replaced small-hand payouts. The next revolution happened when a company came out with a retrofit to the Bally electromechanical machine to make it electronic, which prompted Bally to come out with their electronic series.

The next step was probably the storage of credits on machines. That was a really revolutionary feature, probably the biggest single step for slot machines. When I first started, the machines were just kind of a nuisance sitting on the floor making a little bit of money, but not much. But when the credits feature came out customers didn't consider credits to be money, and so they would play their credits through. That changed game play considerably. The next step was the bill acceptor, which changed the industry a lot. Then came TITO, the ticket in/ticket out scenario.

How did these advances change the way customers played machines?

Customers were given the ability to play longer for their money, therefore they would sit on the floor longer and were enjoying their time more. Once the video machines came on the market, with such features as bonuses, slots began carrying more of an entertainment factor. That has helped increase game play tremendously. And that's where we are today - combining that entertainment factor with bonusing and other features.

What aspects of a slot floor do you first assess in terms of its overall efficiency?

The slot floor has to be efficient for the guests. You have to have a floor laid out in a way that allows traffic to move through easily and also allows guests to easily find what they're looking for. But the main factor is the traffic flow. You have to incorporate enough aisle space, not only for the patrons to get through but also for the employees to get through to service the patrons. If servers can't get there to take care of them, it will cost the casino money. You have to allow for really good traffic flow.

I would say traffic flow is the most important, but it's also something that changes periodically. You have to monitor the floor on an ongoing basis to see if traffic flow is changing. And if it does, you have to rearrange the floor to accommodate that new traffic flow.

The slot floor also has to be attractive for the customers. Use signs where they're needed, but not too many. If you position too many signs out there, then you could have situations where one sign counteracts the other. If you get too many out there, it will defeat the purpose of the signs. You use signs to draw attention to a certain group of

machines, but if there's a sign on every bank it totally loses its entire purpose.

How was the slot floor at Northern Quest restructured?

When I first got here the goal was to go to 2,000 machines, and they were in the process of completing an expansion to take care of that. But when we got it all laid out, we didn't have enough room for the 2,000 units. So we had to get really creative. We established another little bar area where we could include enough machines to get up to 2,000. Then it was discovered that we didn't need 2,000 machines, so we restructured again to improve the floor layout and started eliminating the older machines, which operated on older electronics.

And in cutting our numbers down to make more aisle space, we actually ended up making more money. This was possible with fewer machines because we had created that good traffic flow that I talked about earlier. Also, the newer games we were able to put on the floor attracted more attention and created more play. So even in a recession we're doing considerably better than we were.

What do you consider to be the most effective ways to create excitement on the slot floor?

One of the things I learned here in Washington is that the machines perform better if they're grouped together, where in other jurisdictions properties kind of salt-and-pepper them across the floor. In Washington the people like it better if you group the games together. I learned this the hard way. Placing the same game themes together in groups draws customers a lot better than when the themes are broken up over the floor. This goes back to ensuring the guests can find what they're looking for.

We also run slot tournaments periodically and we've got our players club. We host different kinds of promotions: hot-seat drawings, car and truck and all kinds of different giveaways. We recently ran one in July giving away motor scooters, which was kind of neat. That promotion did really well. July is historically a soft month, but we did a lot better than we had in previous years because we had good promotions going on. Plus we held summer concerts outside, which draws a different clientele. We're drawing people who have never been out here to see our concerts, and we're finding they're coming back when we aren't holding a concert just to play. So that's good. It's worked out really well.

What new products are you considering adding to the casino floor?

Here in Washington, we're on the average at least a year behind the rest of the gaming jurisdictions. The reason for

that is vendors, when they create a new game theme, test that theme in traditional markets. Here in Washington we house server-based lottery games. Once a game theme has established itself as a good theme in other markets, then the vendors rewrite the software to work on the lottery platform. When we see a game theme out there that we like and would like to get, then we start letting the vendors know. Sometimes they'll listen to us, sometimes not. But we're constantly upgrading our floor as new games become available.

Currently in Washington we have five lottery vendors. The original ones were Bally, then Multimedia, and then IGT came along. Then Rocket came in with their lottery game. Then WMS came in with theirs. So the two newest ones are Rocket and WMS. They came in with a different concept – they brought some of their newer games with them. This made the play a lot better, I believe, where the other companies, more traditionally, were going with tribes in other jurisdictions first. So that's helped out a lot. With five different vendors we have much more variety to try on our floor.

What do you see on the horizon that will further enhance the slot experience for your guests?

Most everybody is going to the dual-marker concept, where they can carry their bonuses and other features up into a second screen while maintaining the reel symbols on the bottom, and that's making the games more exciting. This concept is also more expensive, but it's more exciting. It gives people a chance to see some different types of graphic presentations. So the new technology is the adoption of the second monitor to enhance the excitement to the game.

What else is Northern Quest adding to the slot floor?

We're in the process of adding signage. We have very few signs out there, but now we're starting to pick the spots and put some more signs up. We're putting together a video presentation of everything that's going on throughout the entire casino. Plus we're displaying the video on one of the outside walls, so people passing by can see that presentation, which creates a lot of player interest.

I've been here at Northern Quest since November 15th of 2008 and it's been one of the best casinos I've ever worked at. It's a very progressive tribe I work for. They make the funds available for the casino to keep improving the slot floor. Northern Quest has done an absolutely awesome job of providing the materials and funds to enhance the casino. ♣

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