Building Excitement for Opening Day:
A Case Study on New Employee Engagement at Harrah’s Entertainment

By Brian Baker
Vice President, New Media and Creative Strategy
Aon Hewitt

Brad Warga
Vice President, Talent and Engagement
Harrah’s Entertainment, Inc.
Harrah’s Entertainment (www.harrahs.com), Inc., is the world’s largest provider of branded casino entertainment, with 65,000 employees worldwide. Since its beginning in Reno, Nevada, 70 years ago, Harrah’s now owns or manages casino resorts on four continents. Its properties operate primarily under the Harrah’s, Caesars, and Horseshoe brand names. Harrah’s also owns the London Clubs International family of casinos and the World Series of Poker.

The Challenge

Harrah’s was doubling the size of its existing casino and entertainment facility in Chester, PA. With the legalization of table games, it had the opportunity to add 700 new employees and—for the first time in Pennsylvania history—introduce customers to the social interactions and fun of poker, blackjack, and roulette.

In addition to introducing table games to the property, Harrah’s wanted to create an exciting launch and build dialogue and momentum for its newest table games employees, supervisors, and customers. This was a clear opportunity to start a new “business within a business” and pilot hiring, onboarding, and engagement programs to drive the service profit chain, which in turn would drive market share.

Before and beyond opening day, Harrah’s wanted a full leadership and engagement plan. To meet its objectives, Harrah’s hired Aon Hewitt to help it build an innovative onboarding and employee engagement approach to create excitement for the upcoming opening of table games and beyond.

The objectives were clear: 1) Hire 600 dealers in 120 days who were more upbeat and positive than any dealers in history and 2) Create a fun environment that celebrated the dealers’ energy, while training them on the functional skills they needed to succeed and 3) foster ongoing dialogue and feedback to avoid unionization.

The Great Audition: Bring Your Inner Entertainer

Harrah’s wanted to attract dealers who projected authentic energy, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude. Rather than use traditional recruiting channels, it held group “auditions” (similar to “American Idol”) of people personally recruited from restaurants, stores, and service centers for their strong customer service skills. A panel of judges selected the finalists who best fit the Harrah’s brand.
Building the Employee Brand

The first 90 days were about building an online “platform” (www.harrachestertablegames.com) and engaging people during their critical new employee training and first 90 days on the job. The next phase was to recalibrate the microsite to include information on the Chester site, new table games, non-table games, leader videos, and profiles. This was a breakthrough use of technology for communicating internally at Harrah’s, enabling management to directly interact with employees and receive feedback through a two-way social engagement platform.

Harrah’s brand is based on building loyalty and value for its customers, employees, business partners, and communities by being the most service-oriented, technology-driven, geographically-diversified company in gaming. Employee engagement is important to differentiating Harrah’s customer experience from other competing companies that are opening table games locally. The onboarding program for Harrah’s Chester created a new activation model for employee feedback and participation, helping Harrah’s to maintain its place as an industry leader.

Trends & Topics

A Q&A with Brad Warga
Harrah’s Corporate Vice President, Talent and Employee Engagement

Q: How is Harrah’s trying to become more innovative across the employee lifecycle?

A: We are taking more control of our hiring destiny, finding new ways to hire people who “culturally fit” our business, versus examining just their skill sets. We use a panel audition to screen for people who are naturally born with gifts that make them a good match for Harrah’s: an upbeat personality and positive attitude, a strong customer service ethic, and the ability to develop deep relationships with customers.

We also changed our onboarding process to be more interactive and geared toward building cultural awareness and pride. We spend more time on developing strong supervisor relationships and engaging employees with value-based rewards.

In addition, we are becoming more assertive about performance management – making sure we are moving out our lackluster performers and bringing in our A players. That is one of the strongest ways we can elevate the customer experience.

The level of service and hospitality we provide for guests is what differentiates our brand from our competitors. We have to select employees who get excited about coming to work—who are at their personal and professional best when they are here.

Q: What do you see as “next practices” for driving employee engagement at Harrah’s?

A: We are committed to building more consistency across the service profit chain—developing a level of ownership with line employees and coaching our leaders to model that culture across the business. For us, the service profit chain is about recruiting and hiring the right people and engaging them to think of ways to drive new forms of revenue.

Of 65,000 employees, 70% are customer-facing. If we could get each of those client-facing employees to get customers to spend an additional $10 during their stay at Harrah’s, imagine the impact to our business.

For Harrah’s, the future is about consistent execution and making sure our culture and values are the same across the business. It’s about helping our managers become better coaches, while instilling an ownership culture to cross-sell, up-sell, and work smarter and faster.
The Approach

Harrah’s wanted to set a high standard for innovative approaches to communications and change management, bringing to life a channel for honest, two-way, and real-time access and engagement.

Together, Aon Hewitt and Harrah’s established four main goals for the project:

1. Introduce, involve, and integrate the leadership of Harrah’s Chester, using a high-touch, high-innovation approach to reach both employees and customers.

2. Build an online community to unite the population of Harrah’s Chester and present the voices of employees, supervisors, and customers.

3. Integrate and inspire a new-hire dealer population, engaging top performers to serve as change agents both during and after the training period.

4. Continue the dialogue with candidates between their acceptance and start dates through educational tools on culture, benefits, service, and technical skills.

Key to the project were two questions: 1) “How do we have the most prepared employees for opening day who are emotionally connected to the business?” and 2) “How do we encourage people to opt out quickly if they realize they are not a fit?”

The Website

The team built a robust, total-employee “table games” portal. The site was web-based and password-protected. Content consisted of:

- **Information Center** – featured a calendar of events and milestones toward opening day
- **Concept Corner** – listed articles on various topics, tips, and techniques to enhance the dealer experience
- **Blog Center** – included Bob’s Blog (a blog from Bob Guidice, VP of Chester’s Table Games) and the Special and Unique Benefits Blog (a blog from the Corporate Benefits department)
- **TV Room** – showcased four 3-minute videos on topics such as being a Harrah’s Hero, joining Harrah’s, and summarizing the unique VIP guest/dealer mixer event
- **Tell Us What You Think** – gave viewers the opportunity to complete various online polls and surveys as well as review results
- **Question/Comments** – provided a place to ask questions, leave comments, and collaborate. Posted comments drove new content
Bob sent out reminder emails to highlight new additions to the site and continually engaged employees by introducing several polls.

**Poll 1: Choice** – Why did you choose to be a dealer at Harrah’s?

**Poll 2: Pride** – What inspires pride in being a member of the Harrah’s team?

**Poll 3: Service** – What helps to create a good personal interaction with guests?

Bob is a strong, inspirational leader with the energy, experience, and passion to exceed expectations and metrics in the employee and customer experience. He has a personal passion for guiding and leading his team to create a flagship property in terms of customer service and employee engagement. He lives and breathes the concept of two-way communication and sees employee engagement as a personal mission.

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**Harrah’s Annual MBA Poker Championship**

**Innovation in Recruiting Top Talent and New Customers**

Each year, Harrah’s Entertainment holds its annual MBA Poker Championship, attracting students and alumni from top U.S. business schools. The three-day event doubles as a recruiting tool for Harrah’s and tournament sponsors and an opportunity to engage an affluent client base. Co-branded activities include a fashion show, happy hours, club nights, spa days, golf outings, a sports bar, and live music. Attendees register for the tournament with their résumé and pay their own travel expenses.

The MBA Poker Championship is the brainchild of Brad Warga, Harrah’s Vice President of Talent and Engagement. “In 2006, the World Series of Poker was one of the most watched programs on ESPN. Knowing how popular poker was on campus, my colleagues and I thought that holding an event exclusively for MBA students would be a fun, innovative, low-cost way to expand our brand on campus and attract new MBA candidates for general management positions. We later realized that the tournament was a great way to introduce a whole new group of gaming customers to the Harrah’s experience.”

Warga advertised the event through social media channels and campus fliers. With registrations booming, he quickly secured sponsors for the event to meet expenses. Recruitment sponsors like Google, Microsoft, and Dell—organizations that routinely recruit MBA students—and brand sponsors like Rolex and Dewar’s, were eager for access to such an affluent, captive audience. The first year the tournament attracted 1,200 people. It has since become a profit center and a customer acquisition event. “Most MBAs may not think about working in the gaming industry after business school,” said Warga. “They think about consulting or financial service positions. We want to open up a whole new career possibility for them, one that they may already be well-suited for.” He adds that Harrah’s now hires about 20 business-school graduates each year and has found 15-20 employees directly from the tournament.

“lt’s a realistic job preview. People who are good at poker are strong decision-makers, are disciplined, and have a well-trained memory. The same is true of people in finance. Bank executives in particular are always interested in this tournament; they believe that good poker players make good brokers.”

Harrah’s approach for the 2011 MBA Poker Championship includes a heavier focus on social media to reach a broader audience of both alumni and students. At the five-year mark, the event attracts about 50/50 students and alumni. “It’s a great, low-cost way to turn job candidates into customers and vice versa. Once we bring them into the Harrah’s experience, we hope to make them customers for life.”
Metrics

Together, Aon and Harrah’s established several metrics for the project:

Turnover

- Reduce turnover – aim for 30% or less turnover through effective engagement, striving to achieve $500,000 in reduced hiring costs
- Create a differentiated candidate, onboarding, and introductory experience, leading to reduced turnover and keeping employees “warmed and informed”
- Educate employees and emotionally connect them to the service profit chain and the employee value proposition of “Get Me. Guide Me. Root for Me.”

Employee Morale

- Increase scores on the Employee Opinion Survey and Supervisor Feedback Survey
- Bring together the best – Harrah’s Chester employees and guests – to increase loyalty and customer service and drive business to Harrah’s Chester Table Games
- Establish customer loyalty and market share even before opening day. Further educate both customers and employees and create excitement
- Work to create the “Harrah’s Family” in Chester, PA

Early Results

Following a mid-July 2010, opening, total results for www.harrahschestertablegames.com are impressive. While it is too soon to tell about the turnover and employee morale metrics, casino traffic has been heavy, and anecdotal evidence and early feedback indicate that Harrah’s customers are excited about their experience with Harrah’s Chester and are building strong relationships with their new dealers.

The MBA Poker Championship was a big hit with the media.

Among the top articles:

BusinessWeek.com
Harvard MBAs Pursue Poker Title as Vegas Recruiters Seek Talent, January 14, 2010

BNET.com
MBA Poker Tournament Offers Unique Recruiting Opportunity, January 13, 2010

BusinessBecause.com
MBA Poker Hopefuls Head to Vegas, February 2010

Brian Baker is Vice President of Aon Hewitt’s New Media and Creative Strategy Group. He can be reached at brian.baker@aonhewitt.com or 212.441.2006.
About Aon Hewitt

Aon Hewitt is the global leader in human capital consulting and outsourcing solutions. The company partners with organizations to solve their most complex benefits, talent and related financial challenges, and improve business performance. Aon Hewitt designs, implements, communicates and administers a wide range of human capital, retirement, investment management, health care, compensation and talent management strategies. With more than 29,000 professionals in 90 countries, Aon Hewitt makes the world a better place to work for clients and their employees.

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