



## TRIBAL CONNECTION | by David Ross



**T**rump 29, an outpost of Donald Trump's gaming empire in California's Coachella Valley, may be the only casino where you'll see high stakes "chicken tic-tac-toe" crossed with TV's newest hit, "The Apprentice."

It's an imaginative approach, but at Trump 29 they never lose sight of the fact that they're competing in a market that has more casinos than the Las Vegas Strip.

Yes, you read that right. How is that possible, you ask? Gary Green, Trump 29's vice president of marketing, answers by drawing a circle representing a radius of

150 miles centered around his property. "That's our market," he says. "There's more casinos in that circle than in Las Vegas; they're just not as close together."

In a scene this competitive, a good marketing hook can go a long way. Their newest is the \$10,000 Chicken Challenge, partly inspired by Donald Trump's hit reality TV show "The Apprentice." On the show, Trump auditions a crop of hungry young executives for a \$250,000-a-year job within his organization. Each week he fires one of the hopefuls, "Survivor" style, until only the winner remains.

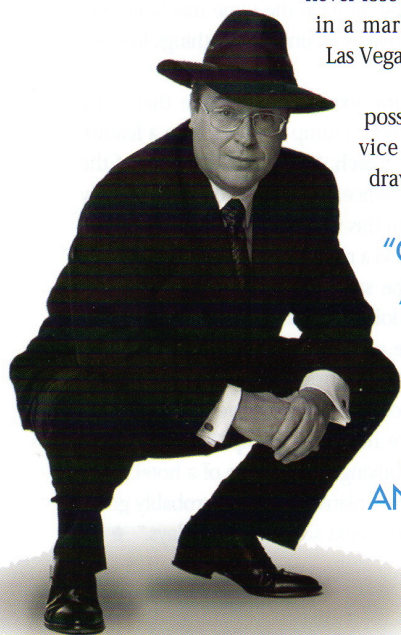
At Trump 29, Gary Green has been auditioning a crop of hungry young hens to replace the original tic-tac-toe chicken, Ginger, who apparently lost one too many contests with her human opponents. Green brought in 15 possible replacements. "Unlike Ginger, these birds are not professionals," he says. "They have been losing quite a bit, but I need them to step up to the plate and learn to play."

Whenever a player beats the chicken, he or she wins \$250. "It's not hard, so that's happening constantly," says Green. "It's a big hit."

Green, who has many years of experience in the direct-mailing business, also recently introduced a new mail campaign that he calls "very cutting edge." Typically, when properties send promotional cash through the mail to

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regular customers, they base the amount on how much the customer gambled the last time they visited. "We've expanded that dramatically," says Green. In addition to considering how much was last gambled, they factor in how many

times the customer visited. "Let's say you have a player who comes in one time and bets \$5,000, and you have someone who comes in 52 times a year and gambles \$100. The way the normal casino promotion would work would be to send the guy who comes in once a year an offer based on \$5,000, and to send the other guy an offer based on \$100."

Instead, Trump 29 takes the amount wagered and adds how many times the customer visited, then makes the process like "a three-dimensional chess game" by adding a third element: how recent the last visit was.

If customer visits 52 times, wagers \$100, and visited last week, "We consider that customer much more important because he's so loyal," says Green.

This approach to rewarding loyal customers, called RFM (recency, frequency and monetary) is "more personalized, more direct," he says, noting that it's a fresh concept to the gaming industry.

More important, he adds, "We're seeing a forty percent increase in traffic directly tied to the offers."

As for why this marketing angle hasn't been tried before in gaming, Green speculates: "We're a very incestuous world, and we borrow a lot from each other, but not necessarily from other industries, such as direct mail. Getting customers to return again and again is just one aspect of successfully building a market base, but it's the unique product that Trump 29 offers that brings customers in to begin with."

Trump 29 figures that it pulls from three markets. The first of these is the local market, taking in the Coachella Valley, up through Indio, La Quinta, Palm Desert and Palm Springs. The next largest market is Los Angeles and its bus patrons, who travel about two hours to get to the casino. The third is what Green calls "the extended market," beyond the Palm Springs area and into Riverside County.

Green also makes an effort to appeal to what he calls his "fourth market," the long-haul truck drivers with big rigs. For

them, Trump 29 is a place to relax as they enter California from Arizona.

"We pay special attention to truck drivers," says Green. "Any truck driver who shows a commercial license, I'll give them five dollars to play."

The casino also draws a clientele interested in fine dining, including a twist that brings in devotees of the Atkins Diet: the Rattlesnake restaurant, which serves their particular low-carb needs with delicious dishes. Jimmy Schmidt, the restaurant's proprietor, is a three-time James Beard award-winning chef and makes many of the Atkins diet candies and desserts. But the Rattlesnake isn't just for dieters; it's also the only five-star restaurant in the valley.

For other eating options, the casino boasts the Caf Capitata, a full-service restaurant with a traditional casino buffet, and a food court offering fast food, Chinese fare and pizza.

The casino also contains the largest indoor auditorium in the valley, with 2,300 seats. It has hosted headliners including Don Rickles, Jim Belushi, Englebert Humperdink, Styx, the Temptations and Hall and Oates.

"The real uniqueness of this property is that it combines the Native American integrity in the valley with the Trump savvy," Green adds. "We have consulting help from the Trump operation in New Jersey constantly. It allows us to take some of that organization's know-how, mix it with the integrity of the Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians, and create a property that's qualitatively different from other properties."

"It's not just visually that we're different. Our customer service, our promotions and our attitude is different. At the end of the day, [the casinos] all have the same machines and the same amenities. What makes us unique are things like our customer service."

Of course, most casino execs would make that same claim. But according to Green, Trump 29 does have a feature his competitors truly can't match: "Cutting through all of the technical jargon and the science, the fact is, that I give away more money than anyone in this valley."

He cites an example: On a midweek day, when the casino wasn't particularly busy, he says "I know for a fact that we gave away sixty thousand dollars, because I personally handed out the checks. As for the actual total, it's got to be a huge figure. Particularly when you consider that we are a casino with two thousand slot machines and thirty-five table games."

As for what the future holds for Trump 29, a hotel may be in the cards. "We are studying the addition of a hotel," says Green. "We have no concrete plans yet. We're probably going to make a decision within the next sixty to ninety days." ♠