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Executive decisions

The management team of the Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino has created its own brand of hands-on customer service through innovation, dedication

By Andy Holtmann
Photos by Regina Lafay



Barona's executive council has chosen to embrace customer service as its central business strategy. Pictured from left to right are: W. Dean Allen, assistant general manager of finance; Rick Messura, assistant general manager of hospitality operations; Rick Salinas, assistant general manager of human resources; Bonnie LaChappa, councilwoman, Barona Tribal Council; Karol Schoen, general manager; Linda Devine, assistant general manager of sales and marketing; Lee Skelley, assistant general manager of casino operations; Don Speer, chairman of Venture Catalyst.

Nestled in a rural countryside setting near the suburban San Diego community of Lakeside, Calif., the Barona Band of Mission Indians enjoy the atmosphere and ambiance of their reservation's surroundings—clean air, rolling meadows, unfettered hillsides. At first glance, it may seem an odd place to establish a 2,000-slot casino and 400-plus room hotel.

But unlike its mid-size casino counterparts found in commercial casino markets like Las Vegas, the Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino doesn't offer value-oriented amenities like a movie theater, bowling alley or a spattering of casino bars. And that's just the way Barona's executives like it.

Their end goal isn't to cater to throngs of value-conscious gamblers. It's to build relationships with people they refer to as "real players."

"Internally we refer to it as the casino-centric program. It's a throwback to the business models of Las Vegas during the golden years of the 60s and 70s. Not for nostalgic reasons, but for common sense reasons," said Don Speer, chairman of Venture Catalyst, a firm that has worked closely with Barona to develop the property from the small bingo operation it was many years ago to the multimillion-dollar facility it is today. "Las Vegas had a handful of major resorts that were quite a distance away from each other. The way Las Vegas created a business model back then was by using a casino-centric way of thinking. They didn't make money from rooms and such. They focused on the casino for profitability. Now they're all next to each other along the Strip competing for money in a Disneyland sort of capacity. They charge for rooms and food and such, and it doesn't matter where you spend your money. Here, it matters. Here, it's a members-only kind of resort."

But following a "members only" mentality doesn't mean customer service is reserved for only the highest tier of players. Barona was built on customer service and has realized how to tap the customer service potential of all its employees, practices and amenities to create a resort atmosphere where players are truly rewarded for their business.

Customer comfort

From the second guests and casino

patrons arrive on Barona's property, they are warmly greeted with a smile and a wave from guards that man the entrance road. Though the parking areas are mere paces away, trams scour the lots offering rides to the hotel and casino entrances. Upon entering the hotel lobby, bellhops and desk clerks are quick with a smile and hello, attending to arriving guests' immediate needs no matter how busy the check-in area might be.

"The underlying theme here is to treat every guest as though they were a guest in your own home," said Karol Schoen, Barona's general manager.

"When everybody walks through the door here, they're wearing an invisible sign that reads 'I'm important. Make me feel special.'"

Barona's hotel is separated from the bustling casino—one example of how the tribe emphasizes amenities as an accent rather than lumping all its gaming and non-gaming points of interests together in one area.

"When you check into Barona, the

difference from that of a Vegas-style casino is that you don't walk through slot machines or a noisy lobby or walk 10 miles from the parking facility. You walk into a convenient entrance, with a doorman, and it's a short distance to the front desk, which is not a large size. The environment is relaxing, personalized, the lobby looks out over the golf course... everything about Barona says comfort and relaxation. That's something our guests enjoy very much here," said Rick Messura, Barona's assistant general manager of hospitality operations.

By making overnight guests feel at home, they are more inspired to spend time—and money—in the property's main profit center, the casino.

It's there that many people assume the customer service might take a back seat. After all, at a good number of casinos throughout the United States, that's exactly the case. At Barona however, the casino is an area where customer service is highly emphasized. >>

Keeping it clean

Cleanliness is a top priority at Barona

While one might expect the high-end areas of Barona to be polished daily, there is a quite noticeable focus on cleanliness throughout the entire resort.

Though the current facilities are just over three years old, the staff of Barona has made maintaining the grounds a key focus from day one, knowing that it's an important aspect to keeping the customer happy.

"One of the things that attracted me to Barona originally was that people said it was one of the cleanest casinos they had ever seen," said Rick Messura, assistant general manager of hospitality operations at Barona. "As the tribe built the new resort and added the hotel, it was one of our goals to keep the standard of the casino and make sure that the entire resort was cleaner than anything seen before."

The Barona tribal council ensures the resort has plenty of resources to constantly maintain the grounds. If a crack appears in a wall, it's instantly fixed. Carpets throughout the resort are already being replaced, long before they pass their expected lifecycle. A team of painters also works daily to refresh different areas of the resort. And it's not just grounds crews doing the work.

"Cleanliness is everybody's job here at Barona—it's not just the housekeeping staff. Our company culture is that everybody participates in keeping it clean. No matter who you are, from the general manager on down, you either clean something or call someone to come clean it. You don't just walk on by. Because of that culture, we are able to maintain the property in an absolutely spotless condition," Messura said.

Linda Devine, Barona's assistant general manager of sales and marketing, said a company recently did a survey on casino cleanliness, and even it was surprised at how well-maintained the property was.

"They could not believe how clean a facility we had, even on the weekends. They compared our scores to other casinos and ours were much higher," she said. "We have our visual design department walk through the property every day. It's one thing to build a gorgeous resort but it's another thing to maintain it, especially when you've got 10,000 people coming through every day."

—Andy Holtmann

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Barona's golf course relies on the area's natural beauty for appeal.



The property cannot provide liquor on the casino floor like Las Vegas casinos, but friendly drink servers man nearly every slot bank, offering players free soda, juices, coffee and other beverages. Casino patrons can also partake of another service they won't find in most casinos—white cloth game-side dining.

"Our game-side dining, pool-side dining and things like that are really just an extension of bringing a service that the guests want to where they are. If they want steak and lobster while they're playing their favorite machine, we provide that," said Scott Kidd, the property's executive director of food and beverage. "We serve well over 1,000 guests game-side on a daily basis. It could be as simple as a pack of cigarettes to something like Beluga Caviar. Whatever it is, we can get it to them wherever they are. It makes it convenient for the guest. That's really what it's all about. Whether it's at a concession stand point or in the restaurant, we cater to the guests."

In addition to Barona's 2,000 slot machines, patrons can also get in on the action at the nearly 70 table games featuring blackjack, baccarat, craps, roulette and other games; a 15-table poker room; an off-track betting area; and of course, a large bingo facility.

When not gambling, guests can dine at one of several eating establishments, including the upscale Barona Oaks Steakhouse, the multistation Ranch House Buffet, the Branding Iron Café, the Asian eatery Ho Wan, the 50s-style malt shop Feisty Kate's and a food court.

"We focus on being able to provide a wide variety of quality items that would appeal to any different number of ethnicities, age groups, etc. If they want a great hot dog, we've got it. If they want great caviar, we've got it," Kidd said.

Among a host of other amenities, Barona patrons can also relax in the property's Ambiance Day Spa, get hitched in the property's quaint but picturesque wedding chapel or play a couple rounds of golf on the resort's award-winning golf course, where again, guests are treated like VIPs.



In an effort to cater to the high end, lavish suites (above) and amenities like private butler services (below) are available to upscale clients at Barona.



"As soon as they arrive we help them with their bag, check them in at guest services, put them in a golf cart, tell them all about Barona and the golf course and then let them play," said Don King, the resort's executive director of golf. "It's a perfect golf course. It's rated number five in the state by *Golf Course Magazine*. You get the experience of a tour golf course. The greens are in fabulous condition all of the time. And the service is outstanding. We're hands-on with our job from start to finish."

King said the course is branded as a "course of nature." There are no homes, shopping centers or walls surrounding the course. It rolls with the land, sloping mildly up hillsides, specked with oak trees and allowing the area's natural wildlife to mingle with golfers.

It's all of these amenities, and the customer service and attention backing them and the gaming floor, that have drawn people to the resort. The popular Club Barona player's club has over 750,000 members, and the resort has been able to establish solid relationships with plentiful rewards for its players.

"We're not interested in people paying for the hotel room, or their tee time, or food. When we reach our absolute nirvana, 100 percent of the rooms are comped, 100 percent of the food service is comped, and no one pays for a round of golf," said Troy Simpson, Barona's executive director of casino marketing. "Right now about 88 percent of the hotel rooms are comped. Those people provide the high-market value on the casino floor."

Catering to the high-end

Unlike the majority of Indian casino properties, Barona caters heavily to the high-end customer. The resort features lavish suites, appointed with luxuries like fine linens, 27-inch plasma televisions, Jacuzzi tubs, spacious three-head showers and dual his and her bathrooms. Some of the suites also feature private work-out rooms and wet bars.

There are three El Capitan Grande Suites, each at 3,460 square feet; five Canyon Suites at 1,068 square feet apiece; eight La Fiesta Suites at 1,254 square feet apiece; and 16

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Barona features two private gaming salons in which "whales" can gamble without interruption or annoyance from the general public.

Mission Suites, each at 836 square feet.

Each suite guest is cared for by a personal butler. Barona's executives created the butler program to provide another layer of direct care and attention to guests.

"We have a highly trained room service staff that handles our guest rooms. They work in concert with the butler

staff and they go through many of the same programs. But the butler staff are assigned to the high-end suites are uniformed differently and do have a different set of duties," Messura said. "The suites have a lot more amenities and things that need further attention that the typical guest rooms do not have." The butler staff can attain things for

the guest that might not be readily available on the property, such as special foods or clothing. A recent high-end guest requested to have a snow cone machine in his suite, Messura said.

Barona's staff had to go off-property to find one, but it was there waiting in his room in less than an hour.

"It's that kind of attention to detail that keeps our guests happy," Messura said.

For the even more discerning and private guests, such as celebrities and "whales" (the elite high rollers), Barona offers two spacious and well-appointed private gaming suites. There, the casino is brought to the gambler, with a room inside the suite that is set up like a mini-casino. The guest can play \$100 or \$500 slot machines, or place large wagers at table games with a private dealer.

Each gaming suite also features its own cashier area, where funds can be deposited. Through electronic funds transfer and fingerprint technology, the player can instantly gamble without having to constantly seek the services of the cashier, allowing him to bet at will.

"Another feature on these slots is that we've set it up so that if you reach the maximum allowance, say, if you hit a jackpot, where the machine would normally lock up and someone would have to come and unlock it for you manually, now it's over here on the wall, where we have two employees who record the jackpot and unlock it for you," said Lee Skelley, Barona's assistant general manager of casino operations. "It's all done electronically and your game is never interrupted. At the end of the session we issue you one W2G for the entire summary of your play."

Each high roller can bring his family and friends, who can enjoy fine dining and entertainment in a separate room, but no other player can enter the gaming salon. It's a concept that Barona has had an enormous amount of success with, Skelley said.

"We opened the first private salon in February 2001 in our old facility. At that time there were no private gaming rooms in Nevada. They had high-end exclusive gaming, but at the time, private gaming in Nevada was illegal. Once we opened this and Nevada found out about it, they passed SB287, which made private gaming legal in Nevada. The Gaming Control Board put a number of restrictions on it, and consequently I don't think it has met with the same success there that it has here."

Tribal benefits

Gaming profits from Barona help tribe, surrounding communities

In the last five years, the Barona Band of Mission Indians has enjoyed sweeping financial success, thanks largely to its Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino. Now the tribe is focused on giving back—not just to its 500 tribal members, but to the communities around the resort as well.

Just a sampling of items the tribe has vested its earnings into include: \$3.5 million for a waste-water treatment plant that reclaims water for nearby ranches and fields; \$1,500 per semester college scholarships for tribal members; a \$225,000 expansion of Barona's one-room school; \$115,000 for education programs; \$1 million for new homes for tribal families with children; a \$600,000 gas station that operates 24 hours and employs 18 people; a \$400,000-a-year emergency services department with paramedics and fire fighting capability; a \$500,000 fire station; a \$2 million renovation of the tribe's community center and gymnasium; and an \$80,000 expansion of the tribe's administration offices.

Barona Councilwoman Bonnie LaChappa said one of the most important expenditures has been providing health insurance for the tribe.

"In the earlier days we didn't have a lot of insurance, and we have a lot of diabetes and other ailments. So having a good insurance plan is vital," she said.

LaChappa said the tribe also recently donated \$1 million to a San Diego-area hospital and has been a big contributor to education programs at San Diego State University.

Being able to upgrade the tribe's standard of living and become a philanthropic force in the San Diego area makes tribal leaders proud, and helps open the eyes of the tribe's heritage with the public, LaChappa said.

"I love the reservation, I love my heritage, I love everything about it. But back (before the casino) a lot of people didn't know who we are. Now we have ability to share our heritage. That's the good part," she said. "I was always proud of who we are, but now I can tell my story and our story. When I was in school, there wasn't a lot of information on Native Americans. Now there is."

—Andy Holtmann

Barona has two separate enclosed limousine entrances and a private helipad that aid in separating high-rollers from the general public.

Tech savvy

The relationship between Barona and Venture Catalyst goes back 15 years. Venture Catalyst was the management company that basically built Barona from the inception. Over the years, the relationship has changed into a consulting agreement where Venture Catalyst now aids and assists Barona on a number of issues.

One of Venture Catalyst's developments at Barona was its Mariposa Software, a series of customer relationship management (CRM) modules that do detailed customer tracking and analysis. That technology helps Barona's staff better understand what their customers want and don't want from all areas of the property. In tracking play, Barona can also know which players are spending more and reward them appropriately.

"The original intent with developing Mariposa was to create a CRM solution that matched and integrated well with the philosophies of the casino, which was an instrumental part of our success in creating software," said Javier Saenz, senior vice president of information solutions for Venture Catalyst. "The software reflects the philosophies of Barona and the needs of a successful operation."

One of Barona's philosophies is to give customers convenience and rewards through the use of tech-savvy approaches, but to avoid overwhelming them.

"We look beyond relying solely on technology. Our staff is provided with tools to help them identify real players on the floor and provide human to human service," Simpson said. "One of the products we use is the Credit Contact System. It's one of the more impressive suite items where you can look at a map of the floor and if you're an executive host, you'll see it flash in one of the coded colors which tells you who is in the house, where they are and if they're winning or losing. You can check to see that the player wants or needs, make sure there are comps, etc. We invest in the front-line staff and the technology to help the staff do their job better and take care of our clients properly."

Simpson said the Barona model of CRM differs from that of many corporate-controlled casinos, where the >>

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A section of Barona's casino floor is carved out for new slot games that aren't available in other jurisdictions.



emphasis is on improving the bottom line rather than customer service.

"I see great opportunity for operators like us, rich operators, to exploit the fact that these efficiency operators are more concerned with cash flow than customer satisfaction," he said. "They cut expenses and cut down on amenities and staff. When you start shedding employees you end up with a vending machine casino. The real difference maker is the relationships that are built on the floor."

So successful has the Mariposa Software been in helping Barona

develop relationships with its customers that Venture Catalyst has brought the technology to the general marketplace.

"We are a for-profit business and we realized we had developed an asset that we could commercialize," Saenz said. "It's something that we recognized as an absolute diamond in the industry. But we also did it because we felt there was a need for it."

On the casino floor itself, Barona has been regarded as an innovator. It was the first casino to implement large-scale ticket-in/ticket-out features on its slot machines, serving as an adjunct proving grounds for what has become an industry-sweeping technology.

The property has also recently implemented wireless cashiering.

"We can have up to 70 cashiers on a busy night. We could easily put more kiosks on the floor, but instead our cashiers have handheld wireless devices so they can better serve the guest and offer personal customer service," said Tony de Leon, former IT director for the property, who now operates his own consulting business with Barona as a key client. "The guests appreciate it, and it's because of technology that we can do this."

Barona also features a prominent section of its casino devoted to the newest games and slot titles. This "beta-test" area has become quite popular with Barona customers, who know they get to play the games first before they are approved in other markets.

"(Our players) know they're the

judges. If the game does well on the floor we buy the game and put it somewhere on the floor. If the game doesn't do well we send it back to the manufacturer and they send us another," Skelley said. "Each of the major manufacturers knows that putting their games here gives them exposure, and it helps them consider whether or not they should put them everywhere else. The feedback they get from this area tells them what they can expect out of the game."

Currently, Barona is beta-testing International Game Technology's server-based (sb™) gaming products.

"Like anything having to do with technology in Barona, this is a good place for IGT to be with its server-based games. Our support and the resources that we have make this a prime place for testing or deploying a new product and making it successful," de Leon said.

Another technology innovation Barona has implemented is combining the guests' room keys and Barona Club cards into one carded solution, allowing players to use their card for a variety of purposes, earning valuable rewards each time they use the card.

Mike Murphy, Barona's executive director of information technology, said other innovations the property is considering bringing to the casino floor include more handheld applications to increase customer service efficiency and the possibility of adding fingerprint technology to casino games.

Strategic staffing

No matter how many new games, guest room comforts, amenities and services a casino resort might have, one sour face or bad guest experience can ruin it all. That's why perhaps the biggest "innovation" Barona's executive team relies on is the resort's employees.

Schoen said Barona's executives go to great lengths to find employees who fit well with the positions they hire for.

"We always look to hire nice people. You generally can pick that up within the first few minutes of an interview," she said. "We have some interesting interview processes where we do group interviews and try to engage the interviewee in a group atmosphere so that they are more comfortable and their personality comes out. Then we can see who would be a front-line employee, who can interact with guests, if they'd be more comfortable behind the house, and we figure out where they would fit best. We call it 'putting them in the right >>



Troy Simpson, executive director of casino marketing (left) and Javier Saenz, senior vice president of information solutions for Venture Catalyst (right)

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Barona employees, like these pictured here in Barona's in-house floral department are trained to consistently aim to make customers happy.

seat on the bus."

Rick Salinas, Barona's assistant general manager of human resources, elaborated on the employee hiring process.

"Our interview process is based on positive behavior and personality. We want to make sure all new employees have the propensity to understand how to take care of people and how to take care of their needs. We try to ensure that our employees are customer service oriented. We focus on past behaviors and whether or not they're going to manifest themselves into poor customer service," he said. "When we go through applicants, we try to establish an interview

environment that isn't typical. We don't want them to know what the correct answer is supposed to be. We try to get people to be themselves. It's all about observing. How they interact with people in a group environment determines if and how we hire them."

"This couldn't have happened if it wasn't for Karol's focus on relationships with staff members," Speer added. "We have 3,500 employees and Karol personally knows 90 percent of them. Karol talks about us being a family. It's true. This isn't a mom and pop operation, however. It's dramatically different from any resort or hotel you could ever find."

Barona also places a strong emphasis

on its mission statement: "To continually improve the quality of life in the Barona family."

"Every employee can recite that. That's the difference. It comes from Karol. All of her assistant general managers understand and believe in it. Everyone from the floor up believes in it," Speer said.

Schoen said employees are treated like part of a family and that the staff supports and looks out for each other as any close-knit family would. She noted that some of the resort's employees come from as far away as 50 to 100 miles to work at Barona every day. Simpson also noted that turnover among employees at Barona is very low, and that several have been with the property since its heyday as a small bingo facility in the early 1980s and 1990s.

"We keep our staff happy. The last time I checked, Indian Gaming had a turnover rate of 68 percent. We have a turnover of about 18 percent. I think that says a lot," Simpson said.

'Campus' atmosphere

Barona goes above and beyond simply finding the right employees. Consistent training is the key not only to helping get the most out of employees, but to helping them grow as well.

There are several ongoing classes, programs and other forms of training that have helped employees become more involved with their jobs—creating careers rather than stopgap employment.

"This is a campus," Salinas said. "The biggest thing for us is molding our leaders. We use an off-the-shelf leadership program from the Educational Institute of the American Hotel Association called Supervisory Skill Builders that we enroll anyone going into a front-line supervisory position into. Then, they go through Performance Management which we developed internally on basic management technical tasks. Then, they go through another program from Achieve Global. That gets into more interactive leadership skills—how to motivate people, resolve conflicts, etc. We worked with Achieve Global to customize the program to Barona's standards."

Barona also created its own foodservice training center, which has developed into a full-fledged culinary school—the Barona Culinary Institute—which has attracted students from all over who wish to sharpen



At the Barona Culinary Institute, students get hands-on experience through working at the resort. Here, students are learning new ways to prepare dishes.

their skills at the resort.

"I really believe that if you challenge people to learn, they're going to be motivated on the job. We're trying to achieve that with all employees here, not just the chefs," said Dean Thomas, Barona's executive chef of food and beverage. "We try to give that motivation to continue to learn, and to think critically. It helps the whole team become better and better and work toward higher goals."

Through the institute, Barona has developed an accredited Culinary Apprenticeship Program with approval from the California Division of Apprenticeship Standards and the American Culinary Federation. Barona will also soon be renovating part of the resort grounds into a permanent education facility for the institute.

Another area where Barona offers hands-on training is with horticulture. The resort offers courses in which Barona's grounds are used to study and implement the latest landscaping and horticulture trends. The resort also has its own in-house flower shop where employees learn the latest in

floral arrangements.

With constant training and attention to detail across all departments, it's hard for any employees to get complacent in their daily work.

"Training is the number one motivation for loving the job here," Schoen said. "We focus on education unlike any other casino resort."

And the Barona tribe remains committed to devoting the resources to constant training, innovation and daily maintenance, keeping the property's customer-friendly brand in tact.

"We have a tribe that understands

what we're trying to do long term and understands that this is gaming and with that comes certain risks," said Dean Allen, Barona's assistant general manager of finance. "I don't look at the money we spend as always being costs, even though on a financial statement that's really what it is. It's investment. What we do for our players is an investment. It will help grow the top line in our business. On the surface a lot of it can be challenged when you look at it, but if you make these investments, you'll learn something great down the road." **CJ**

Barona milestones

1983—The tribe opens a bingo hall on the reservation.

1992—The tribe reintroduces Barona Bingo after years of legal uncertainty.

1994—The Barona Big Top opens as the only themed casino on Indian land.

2000—The Barona tribe signs tribal-state gaming compacts with the State of California.

2001—The 18-hole Barona Creek Golf Club opens.

2003—The Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino opens its doors.

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