



F&B Education: Can Certifications Make a Difference?

by Bill Schwartz

The biggest challenge associated with introducing food and beverage control systems to casinos and other markets where food service is not the top priority is the lack of education. Before casino F&B managers are willing to purchase and use food and beverage systems, they must first be comfortable with the concepts and understand the benefits. The inability to relate the benefits to casino or tribal management results in maintaining the status quo.

The lack of education regarding F&B systems, along with the lack of education regarding other modern techniques for controlling and managing food and beverage operations is responsible for significant losses to casinos in the F&B department. At the recent Great Plains/Midwest Indian Gaming Conference in Minneapolis, a recurring theme with the keynote speakers was education. They all agreed that education was perhaps the single best way for tribal nations to ensure their futures. Obviously, they were addressing the larger issue of education in general, and their point is well taken. A variety of options exist for general education through colleges and universities.

But what can casino F&B managers do, short of going back to college to achieve a bachelor's or advanced degree, if they want to further their careers and gain recognition for their achievements? Among the less aggressive approaches to improved F&B knowledge are articles in trade publications or seminars at tradeshow. Many of these articles and seminars can be valuable in gaining some knowledge and perhaps ideas to take back to the job. However, they typically do not result in any form of certification that can be used to compete for higher-paying jobs.

Good for the Goose and the Gander

Although the primary motivation may be personal career enhancement, individual efforts spent on professional education can be of great benefit to the casino as well. Because these courses are specific in nature, as opposed to the more general degree programs, techniques learned tend to be applicable to the workplace. As a result, many wise employers encourage participation in advanced learning, and some actually fund the process as well.

Casinos sometimes fund education without realizing it. When casinos implement new control systems, in most cases those who will be using and managing the systems are trained by the software developer or implementation consultant to operate and maintain it. In addition, as is the case with food and beverage control systems, training involves more than simply the operation of the system, but also best practices and report analysis techniques as well.

Unfortunately, some employees are not interested in learning new systems or techniques, since in many cases, they simply can't see the personal benefit. If, on the other hand, it becomes clear that some financial or career benefit will result from the pursuit of this type of training or related further education, people are more likely to expend the effort to improve their knowledge.

Certification Programs - Bang for the Buck

One of the most effective approaches for encouraging people to get more education is professional certification. While generally not as rigorous or demanding as acquiring letters after the name such as BA, MA, BS, MS or PhD can be, letters such as FMP (Food Management Professional), CHAE (Certified Hospitality Accountant Executive), CHA (Certified Hotel Administrator), CHTP (Certified Hospitality Technology Professional) and many others are attainable and valuable. Of course, some certifications carry significant weight, while others are little more than marketing efforts by trade associations. Therefore, it is important to go after a nationally-recognized certification if possible, and even more important to go after certifications recognized as valuable by the casino industry.

Professional and trade associations are the primary sponsors of certifications. Professional associations, such as the Club Manager's Association of America (CMAA), Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals (HFTP) and countless others have very strong certification programs that in many cases become the cornerstones of their organizations. In fact, professional associations are generally very focused on education, since one of their objectives is to improve the lives and stature of their individual members. These associations are more about their members and less about their industry.

Trade associations, on the other hand, tend to be more industry-centered. In many cases their members are organizations, not individuals, and these organizations tend to focus on legislation and industry marketing. Trade associations such as the National Restaurant Association (NRA) and the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) also offer educational programs leading to various industry-recognized certifications. In fact, the NRA and AH&LA have both established educational subsidiaries to handle certification. However, certifications offered through trade associations tend to be less prestigious (and typically easier to achieve) than those offered through professional associations.

The National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA), the Indian gaming industry's primary trade association, tends to focus on areas of immediate concern to its members, such as education

related to regulatory compliance and effective gaming operations. However, NIGA has recently been looking more closely at training for food and beverage or hospitality managers.

Ernest L. Stevens, Jr., Chairman of NIGA explains, "For the past several years NIGA has convened a National Indian Hospitality Network and in response to their requests for academically-based training, has offered a Certificate in Hospitality Management in conjunction with the George Washington University Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management. NIGA also offers certifications in Food and Beverage and Information Technology Management as part of our Gaming Management Training Program offered in partnership with the Hospitality College at the University of Houston. Both of these courses have an exam component and lead to a larger Certificate of Competency in Gaming Management."

Chairman Stevens goes on to say, "As Indian gaming becomes more established and expands in the hospitality arena, NIGA is exploring options that will fill the dual need of providing our members with the certification-based programs they desire for career growth, and our member faculties seek for the best employees."

Until such time as NIGA establishes a nationally-recognized certification program related to casino food and beverage, perhaps the best place for F&B professionals to go for career-enhancing certification would be the NRA, AH&LA and HFTP.

Certification Benefits

HFTP conducted a survey (2006 Annual Compensation and Benefits Survey) and found justification for that belief. According to Frank I. Wolfe, CEO of HFTP, "A CHAE (Certified Hospitality Accountant Executive) earns about 13% more annually than a non-certified professional, and a CHTP (Certified Hospitality Technology Professional) earns about 17% more annually than a non-certified professional in the same position." On the club management side, David McCabe, Senior Director of Education for CMAA states that "Club managers that receive their CCM (Certified Club Manager) certification are generally compensated at a rate of about 15-20% higher than their non-certified counterparts."

Both of these professional associations agree that education and certification are essential for their members and the association. HFTP's Wolfe makes the point. "HFTP is a professional individual membership organization that focuses on increasing the professionalism of our members and the industry. Because of this focus, our certifications are paramount to the scheme of the association." CMAA's McCabe makes essentially the same point. "Professional development is the cornerstone of our association and the certification program is at the heart of our professional development program. Becoming

certified is the main goal for most of our members who participate in the professional development program."

Where to Go

Probably the best place to start with regard to certification for food and beverage managers is the National Restaurant Association. The Food Management Professional (FMP) certification is nationally recognized and specific to food and beverage operation. Those involved with the hospitality management, accounting or information technology side of the casino business would be well served to look at HFTP's CHAE and CHTP programs or AH&LA's CHA certification.

Mary M. Adolf, president and chief operating officer of the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation describes their programs. "The NRAEF ManageFirst Program® offers ten certificates in topics designated by industry professionals as those necessary for management success. From controlling food costs to menu marketing and human resources, this program was designed with the intention of helping better prepare employees to meet career challenges and make an immediate organizational impact. The NRAEF's Foodservice Management Professional® certification distinguishes restaurant and foodservice managers who achieve the high level of knowledge, experience, leadership and professionalism our industry most desires. For this reason, more employers prefer candidates who hold the FMP® credential."

Regardless of the certification path, it seems to clearly be in the casino's best interests to encourage and promote the education of their food and beverage managers. With losses due to lack of education and systems averaging more than 5% of total food and beverage revenue, any progress made in this direction results in significant savings. If casinos or, better yet, the gaming industry were to identify worthwhile certification programs and reward workers who achieve those certifications with higher pay or increased responsibility, the objective of the keynote speakers and others promoting education in the industry might be easier to meet. And even if they don't, it is likely that individuals who put forth the effort to attain certification will find themselves more effective and more marketable as a result.

For more information on these certification programs, visit the association web sites naref.org, hftp.org and abla.com. These sites have full descriptions of their respective programs and any application or qualification information needed to get started. ♣

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