

A CASINO PLAN RENO CAN BET ON

Navegante's Larry J. Wolf Has a Strategy to Lure Locals to GSR

BY E. C. GLADSTONE

Leaving no stone unturned in its mission to create the best destination in Reno, the Grand Sierra Resort and Casino team knew that a state-of-the-art casino experience was essential—which is why they called on the Navegante Group. Though little known to the public at large, the Las Vegas-based company is one of the biggest independent organizations in the gaming business, creating, managing and consulting on an impressive number of casinos worldwide, including Carson City's Casino Fandango; downtown Las Vegas' Plaza, Vegas Club, Gold Spike and Western hotels; Casino Niagara and others in Ontario and British Columbia, Canada, and still more in Europe and Asia.

"Every market is a little different," Navegante Group founder and chairman Larry J. Wolf says. "When we opened on the East Coast we had four craps games, and by the end of the year, we had 24, because people on the East Coast love craps. In Canada, where people have been indoctrinated playing lotteries, people are interested in a big jackpot."

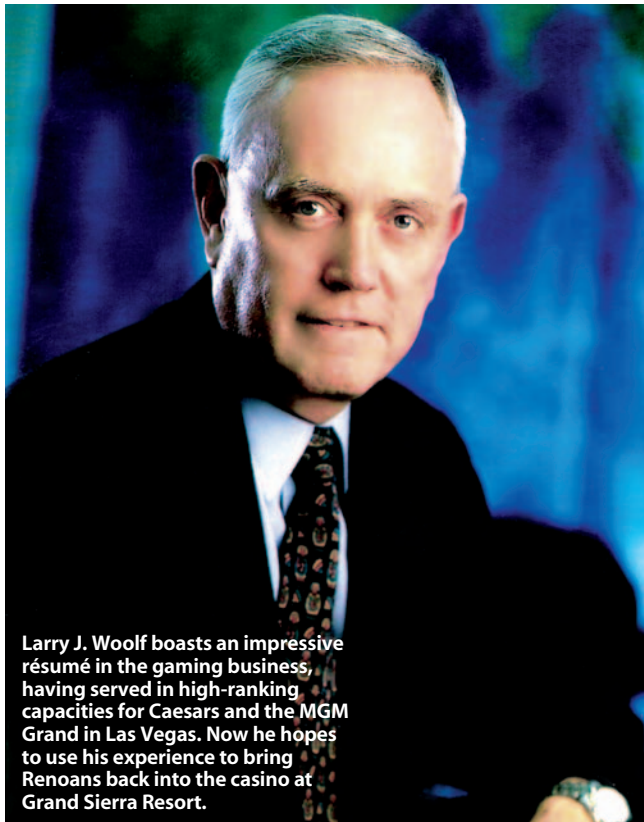
But for Wolf, Reno's Grand Sierra was not just another gaming project. Though this no-nonsense professional doesn't come across as someone who mixes sentimentality with business, he reveals that this project is somewhat personal.

"I grew up in that area," he explains. "I was a dealer at Harrah's Reno and a general manager there." That was nearly 40 years ago, and since then, he has served as senior vice president of Caesars Atlantic City, president of Caesars Lake Tahoe and chairman/CEO of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas before starting Navegante in 1995.

Wolf was familiar with the property that is now Grand Sierra, as well as the specific challenges it faced in its earlier incarnation. "The Grand Sierra started out

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as the MGM from Las Vegas, which did not cater to the locals. It was upper-crust," he says. "Since MGM, they've had at least five owners, 15 general managers, all with different philosophies at different times. Some of them said, 'Well, we want the locals—but not on Saturdays.' So the locals have felt totally disen-



Larry J. Wolf boasts an impressive résumé in the gaming business, having served in high-ranking capacities for Caesars and the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Now he hopes to use his experience to bring Renoans back into the casino at Grand Sierra Resort.

franchised with this property, no matter what name it has taken on."

But those days, Wolf says, are over. "Our goal is to tell the locals, 'We want your business,' and keep them coming back," he says. Nonetheless, he realizes it may take more than that to lure many Renoans to the resort and convince them that Grand Sierra is a place for them. "With Grand Sierra creating an expensive Four Seasons image, we're trying to bring in locals and have them experience this and not feel they're Christmas shopping at the airport. We want them to see there's a nice feeling to the place, and yet they get value."

So Wolf is focusing on what he knows are local players' games of choice. "We're going to offer the table games we know locals like," he says. "We're going to make certain that we'll always have lower-limit single-deck blackjack games—and we're going to have an extraordinary amount of penny machines on our floor, a higher percentage of penny poker machines than anyone else."

More than anything, though, Wolf wanted to create a successful players' club. "We have a reasonable number of locals signed up to our players club now, but I want to increase that by a multiple of 10," he says.

Wolf's players' club, called Comps Plus +, follows a whole new set of rules. Unlike the average club, Comps Plus + not only rewards winning players with free meals, rooms, entertainment and giveaways, but it also encourages them to designate their favorite local, national or international charity, which could, depending on their play, be the recipient of a donation from the resort.

"And we hope the charities will send out their flyers to say, 'Go down to the Grand Sierra, and if you're going to gamble, gamble there, because we'll get some of the money.'" Naturally, the club also includes amenities for the players themselves, including VIP parking areas.

But the innovations don't stop there. Wolf is intent on making Grand Sierra one of the first major Nevada casinos to offer portable handheld gaming devices usable in "green-zone" areas of the resort, such as the pool deck and convention center, that will allow guests to wager on sporting events and play video poker, roulette and other games.

Wolf plan is retraining Grand Sierra's staff of dealers and renovating the poker room, which will host at least three televised tournaments a year. He also believes design elements created by Dodd Mitchell will complete the picture. "In order to market successfully you have to differentiate your product from everyone else, and Mr. Mitchell is certainly going to add an element of differentiation," he says.

Wolf says he believes Grand Sierra's "more subdued, more sophisticated environment" will appeal to locals and travelers who are "tired of the high-energy clutter environment of other properties." ❧