

Casino tailors air to delight the nose

Research suggests scents can have effect on behavior

By Onell R. Soto 2 a.m. March 16, 2009



Mark Peltier poured concentrated fragrance into an aroma-dispersal system at the Barona Valley Ranch and Casino. About half of the casinos on the Las Vegas Strip use similar systems. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)

LAKESIDE — High above the Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino, the air smells of the meat roasting in the kitchens below, but it's a different scent that has brought Mark Peltier to the roof.

He's squeezed himself into an air handling unit, and he's got a big bottle of concentrated cedar fragrance.

Over the next few weeks, the contents of that bottle — “cedarwood spice” — will make their way through ventilation ducts and into the noses of thousands of gamblers and hotel guests.

Many will not notice.

The fragrance is designed to be like piped-in music or the colors of the walls. It's part of the experience, but you only know it's there if you pay attention.

Since shortly after they opened, Barona's casino and hotel have used systems installed by Peltier's Minnesota company, AromaSys, to pump in designer fragrances.

About half of the casinos on the Las Vegas Strip use similar systems, and other San Diego County gambling halls are considering scenting their air, including Pala.

Peltier, a small man with long graying hair, is the pied piper of the industry.

“He's the one who single-handedly scented Las Vegas,” said Terry Molnar, executive director of the Sense of Smell Institute, the New York research arm of the fragrance industry's trade association.

Smell is strongly related to emotions, Molnar said. The idea is to put people at ease and connect with them on an emotional level.

There is not much research on the connection between aroma and gambling.

One weekend about 15 years ago, Chicago neurologist Alan Hirsch pumped a pleasant smell into a section of the casino floor of the Las Vegas Hilton and compared the amount gambled there to an area scented differently and to an area with no particular smell.

He also compared bets placed with the weekend before and the weekend after.

Gamblers spent 45 percent more money in the area with a pleasant smell.

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Now Gael Hancock, a University of Nevada Las Vegas researcher, is trying to replicate that experience on a larger scale. She is still sifting through the data from recent scenting experiments.

She said research on the use of scent in stores and hotels indicates it makes a difference in how people behave.

That may be because people stick around in places that smell pleasant, said Pamela Dalton, a psychologist with the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, which researches taste and smell.

“The assumption is if people linger longer in an environment, they will spend more money,” she said.

In Las Vegas, some resorts have a signature smell that is as much a part of their brand as the color on the marquee, like the tropical scent at Mandalay Bay or the floral smell in the Bellagio atrium.

“I would assume it works on some level because so many places do it,” said David Schwartz, director of the Center for Gaming Research at UNLV.

For Barona, the aroma system isn't focused on the bottom line, *per se*, but on creating a pleasant place to be, said Rick Messura, who oversees the resort's hospitality side, including design and construction.

The smell changes whether one is in the 310,000-square-foot casino, the hotel lobby or the wedding chapel – where the scent is called “cedar seduction.” The rooms are not scented.

In the casino, powerful air systems are designed to suck cigarette-smoke-laden air out and replace it with the subtle smell.

Peltier has scented stores, museums and special events around the country. Now he focuses on high-end hotels, resorts, spas and casinos.

Finding the right smell is a tricky thing, Peltier said. The air systems in some buildings don't work well, so the aroma pools in some areas and doesn't make it to others.

Also, the scent has to match the feel of the place.

“What you do in Miami is not what you do in Vail,” he said.

Hancock, the UNLV researcher, said it makes sense for casinos to work on scent as carefully as they pay attention to the sound of the machines, the color of the carpets and the height of the ceilings.

“It's really the last sense that is being explored for marketing and communication purposes,” she said.

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