

2010 CASINO MARKETING LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Yes, Santa, there is a Virginia



Dennis Conrad is president and chief strategist of Raving Consulting Co., a full-service marketing company specializing in assisting gaming organizations. He can be reached at +1 775 329 7864; or by e-mail at dennis@ravingconsulting.com.

A short time ago, I received a phone call from Virginia McDowell, the president and COO of Isle of Capri Casinos. I should also tell you that she was returning my phone call, one of many I'm sure she gets from a wide assortment of people wanting to gnaw away at her valuable time.

Now in my totally unscientific sampling of leaving messages for various important muckety-mucks in the gaming industry I can tell you that perhaps 25 percent of them never return my call, 25 percent might return my call after repeated communications from me, 25 percent might have an assistant return my call (and screen the reason for it before deciding if they should talk with me) and 25 percent, thankfully, return my calls promptly and graciously.

But only Virginia McDowell has ever returned my phone call and apologized for not having called me back sooner (it had been two days). Call it a brief glimpse into who she is.

Virginia has the rare ability to make people feel that what they do matters. I remember the first year of our Casino Marketing Conference. We wondered if the industry would get excited or annoyed by an annual gathering of marketers. Virginia not only agreed to be a featured speaker at this nascent event, she let me know that she felt this industry conversation was an important one.

A short time ago, Raving's Vice President of Operations Christine Faria wrote a heartfelt tribute to her mom in our bimonthly company newsletter. Just as heartfelt was the e-mail that Chris received soon after, congratulating her on capturing her mother's spirit in print and poignantly describing how the tribute made the reader appreciate her own mother. The e-mail's author? Virginia McDowell.

I have had a number of discussions with Virginia McDowell over the past decade, all enjoyable and all too short. What I remember from all of them is someone who

looked me in the eye, listened intently and engaged me with conversation that mattered. Virginia is not afraid to share her wisdom or herself in a meaningful way.



As I look at the too few women who have broken the glass ceiling in the gaming industry, they

each stand out in different ways. Some are incredibly bright. Some are great strategists. Some are consummate relationship builders. Some are leaders with great poise who value and motivate those around them. Some have a few of these qualities. Virginia McDowell has all of them.

Like many high flyers in the gaming industry, Virginia has received numerous honors (she was Casino Journal's 2009 Gaming Executive of the Year), and now she is the recipient of our "Lifetime Achievement Award for Casino Marketing". The award will be presented at Raving's seventh annual Casino Marketing Conference, July 19-21, at Paris Las Vegas. While I am sure that Virginia is proud of these and other awards, what struck me in her acceptance of them was her giving credit for them to others, especially those who have worked for her, and her using these prestigious podiums to teach and inspire. Virginia McDowell is all about "team".

In my observation it is somewhat rare to see an accomplished marketer become a senior operations executive, much less a

company president. But Virginia has succeeded in such a transition in seemingly effortless style. She appreciates the power of technology, she understands what measurements really matter, she grasps strategy with uncommon common sense, and she thinks like a customer.

But most important, Virginia McDowell knows that the casino business is all about people. That is why I think it is fitting that she has achieved her greatest success and loftiest position at a company like Isle of Capri. Isle properties are not the biggest or the fanciest (although they might be the most colorful!), and they often are located in smaller cities. But Isle has a clear focus on customers, employees and communities. Isle knows the value of listening to its customers and it "gets" marketing that matters.

Yet, even with such significant strengths and such a strong culture, Isle has had to navigate the most brutal recession the industry has ever known. It has had to reshape its brand strategy. It has had to grapple with finding ways to grow in a no-growth gaming world. It's had to navigate all of this uncertainty without the guidance of its founder and visionary, the late Bernie Goldstein, who saw an opportunity and took a chance in Iowa on an unknown industry with a colorful past and a cloudy future.

But Isle's future is now bright, in part because it took a chance on Virginia McDowell as COO when other companies might have played it safe and put one of the "good old boys" in charge.

Congratulations, Isle, on seeing what now seems obvious. And congratulations, Virginia, on what you've done, but more important, on who you are. 🌍