

# What's In a Title?

## ENTERTAINMENT DEPARTMENT



Entertainment in some shape or form has probably been a part of our culture ever since man has been around. From the caveman days humans have had needs beyond mere food and shelter, and I'm sure that entertainment must

have played a role for a sane survival. Some say that music is the universal language, but I believe that it is entertainment and laughter. In today's horrible economy the discretionary income that may have been set aside for entertainment purposes is now going towards higher priorities. But if possible, getting out every once in a while to view a play, band, or some comedy might just be what the sanity doctor ordered.

The entertainment selections in Las Vegas are legendary, however the behind the scenes role an executive plays to bring them here is not. For this edition of G&L I would like to compare a Corporate position to that of a Property position, in the Entertainment department. To help enlighten us from the Corporate side I went to Judy Alberti, who works for Station Casinos, the Las Vegas local's leader.

Judy began her entertainment career with Station Casinos in Las Vegas in 1994 and served as their Vice President of Entertainment until 2006. She then accepted the position of CEO of the 5,000-seat Dodge Theatre in Phoenix, Arizona. In January of 2008 she became the Vice President of Entertainment for Foxwoods Resort Casino and the MGM Grand at Foxwoods in Connecticut. In June of 2008 Judy returned to Station Casinos to serve in her previous capacity as Vice President of Entertainment.



**Chris Baldizan**  
Vice President of Entertainment  
for Mandalay Bay

For the Property position I approached Chris Baldizan, Vice President of Entertainment for Mandalay Bay. Chris joined the company in 1993 as Events Manager for the MGM Grand Garden Arena and then moved into the role of Vice President of Entertainment and Booking for MGM Mirage Entertainment and Sports. He began his career in the industry as Event Coordinator at the Thomas & Mack Center while attending UNLV, where he earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Hotel Administration.

**G&L:** How many different venues do you book entertainment for?

**JA:** My team and I book entertainment for 24 venues throughout the 10 Station Casinos properties. The venues range in size from small lounges of 50-seat capacity, to approximately 500-seat showrooms at some properties including The Railhead at Boulder Station, Chrome Showroom at Santa Fe Station, Ovation at Green Valley Ranch Resort, Access Showroom at Aliante Station, and Club Madrid at Sunset Station. We have two indoor venues with 2,000-seat capacities which are the Dallas Events Center at Texas Station, and the Grand Events Center at Green Valley Ranch. We also have four outdoor 4,000-capacity venues that are the Sunset Amphitheatre at Sunset Station, The Backyard at Green Valley Ranch, and the Sandbar at Red Rock Casino, which also has a 7,000-seat Amphitheatre.



**Judy Alberti**  
Vice President of Entertainment  
for Station Casinos

**CB:** At Mandalay Bay I am responsible for booking the Events Center Arena, which has 12,000 capacity, Mandalay Bay Beach, with a 3,500 capacity, Mandalay Bay Theatre, home of the Lion King, and other events for dark days and the property lounges which are J-POP lounge and Eyecandy sound lounge & bar.



G&L: Tell us about your direct reports and their titles, and how many total employees you have.

JA: Corporate Production Director, Kevin Scroggins. All Production personnel report up to him, and then he reports up to me. We have 4 Entertainment Managers, who divide the properties up by responsibility which is approximately 2 properties each. Monica Reeves, Mandy Christine, Sharon Boucher, and Tiffany Zurita. All together I have 53 people under me.

CB: I have two Directors that report to me, a Director of Business/Finance and a Director of Operations. In addition, we have an Event Manager responsible for Guest Services and Talent as well as an Event Manager responsible for Operations and change over. We have a Production Manager for the Events Center who is also responsible for booking the lounges and a Production Manager for the Theatre who is our liaison with The Lion King team. We have a Manager responsible for contracts and autocad drawings as well. There are four Supervisors that report to the Director of Operations each with technical responsibilities. There is a Supervisor for Sound, a Supervisor responsible for Lights, a Supervisor for Production, and a Supervisor of Inventory and Equipment. There are also two full time Change Over Supervisors. Our Box Office Staff has a direct report to our Chief Financial Officer, but is also a group I interact with on a daily basis.

G&L: How do you go about getting your Lounge acts and Headliners?

JA: Headliners are generally booked through the major agencies such as William Morris Agency, Creative Artists Agency, Paradigm, etc. Lounge acts can be booked in a variety of ways. Typically if we find an act we like by viewing promotional materials, we will go out to see the group live and then possibly book them. Some of our lounge acts we have brought in from other markets, such as Steel Panther from Los Angeles, and Zowie Bowie and Envy, both from Phoenix. We just intro-



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duced a new act from St. Louis by the name of Dr. Zhivegas. We bring the best tribute acts from around the country to perform on Saturday nights at Santa Fe Station. We have acts such as Yellow Brick Road that performs at three of our properties, and we have been booking them for more than a decade and they are still doing great business. We also feature Banda Tierra Sagrada at Fiesta Rancho on Saturdays, and Boulder Station on Sundays. These are Latin nights that have been highly successful for many years. We are also 4-walling our 250-seat venue at Palace Station to Bonkerz Comedy Club, and since opening in January the response has been very good.

CB: With regard to the lounge acts, we receive quite a bit of promotional material from agents, both locally and nationally. There are many talented lounge acts. The key for us is to have a nice variety while also trying to have the right kind of music that appeals to the demographics of Mandalay Bay. We usually try to see the act perform before we book them. The budgets we have for each lounge are a big part of the decision process, and we constantly track the revenue in the lounges.

Headliners are a completely different world. For the most part we try to be proactive and keep track of which acts are going on tour. If an act is on tour it is usually much more realistic and economically feasible to make a date happen. It also allows us to plan ahead and build other types of events the property has to

offer. There are of course exceptions. If we have a specific date where we are targeting entertainment, we will pursue an act even if the act is not on tour. If we can make the numbers work and the act is willing to participate, we will move forward with what the industry calls "one-offs". We rely very heavily on our partners that purchase tours and promote shows. Entities such as AEG and Live Nation. We are constantly communicating with agents that put these tours together.

G&L: What have been some of your favorite acts over the years?

JA: Toby Keith, Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, Sammy Hagar, Journey, Harry Connick, Jr., Phil Vassar, Aaron Lewis, Dave Koz, Styx, Night Ranger and Shaw-Blades, to name just a few. We book approximately 150 headliners each year, so there are too many to name. But it has been great to see some of the acts who have started in our smaller rooms explode into arena acts, such as Toby Keith, Kenny Chesney, Keith Urban, Rascal Flatts, and Brad Paisley.

CB: Personally, I'm a big fan of music. I don't really have a favorite genre, rather I like entertainers that have fun with our guests and seem to genuinely enjoy themselves. I try to focus on what they do on stage. At the end of the day that is what people, including myself, are paying to see. Acts like The Black Eyed Peas,

*The guys on the top tend to stay on top, making it harder for the new acts to push through, and making it more challenging for us to find viable acts for our smaller venue. — Chris Baldizan*





Bon Jovi and the Rascal Flatts come to mind. They all seem to enjoy seeing people smile, have fun and be entertained. It feels more like a party as opposed to a show.

**G&L:** What are some of the biggest challenges you see in your department?

**JA:** Communication is always key, particularly with each of the ten properties and the Advertising departments. I think we are going to continue to see a fragmentation of media viewing, so it continues to get more challenging to find the right outlets to communicate to the greatest portion of an act's demographic in order to sell tickets.

**CB:** From a global perspective, first and foremost is the economy. Although, even before the world, country and Las Vegas felt the crunch we are feeling now, economics has always been a challenge for Entertainment. We are arguably the most competitive entertainment market in the country. There are several outstanding venues and many outstanding individuals responsible for filling these venues. In the current economy, now more than ever, we are being extremely careful about making sure at the end of the day our guests can afford to purchase tickets.

**G&L:** Has the slowdown in the economy noticeably affected your department?

**JA:** Certainly ticket sales were off for the latter portion of 2008, but we have seen sales increase since January, so I am hopeful that we are at the beginning of the curve in the economic recovery.

**CB:** Not as much as one would think. Artists are still going out and working. Certainly we are managing our expenses hopefully better than we ever have, and at the same time maximizing our revenues where we can. For the first quarter we have seen the impact as there were not many shows touring. From April on, for us, it seems like we are as busy as ever. The proof will be in the pudding when it comes to guests purchasing tickets. From our point of view, we will still focus on offering the highest quality of affordable entertainment while remaining committed to the highest customer service levels.

**G&L:** Where do you see the future of Entertainment going?

**JA:** It doesn't appear that artists/record labels are building the longevity of careers that were typical of the classic rock era, or maybe it is just that society moves so much faster now we are more interested in the next shiny object that grabs our attention. Regardless, it certainly makes it a bit more challenging to book newer artists who fall off the charts for a while, because they don't seem to hold their ticket selling capability in comparison to a classic

rock artist who may not have charted for two decades. In addition, I think there tend to be more classic rock formatted radio stations that would keep the frequency of the spins of classic rock artists in high rotation vs. a 90's rock act that gets very few spins on their catalogue. New country is also a challenge. When we were booking up and coming country acts during the explosion of the mid to late 90's, there were many more acts who meant 500-1,000 tickets. Now it is much harder to develop new acts based on the economy and the fact that there are fewer artists in rotation now, with radio stations playing the top 40 songs at greater frequency. Therefore, the guys on top tend to stay on top, making it harder for the newer acts to push through, and making it more challenging for us to find viable acts for our smaller venues.

**CB:** Entertainment, in my opinion, like every other sector of business and life continues to evolve. It is difficult to predict the future segment of people's lives, as that is always changing and is subject to so many outside influences. I think the one constant is that people love to be entertained and to have a brief escape from the grind of everyday life. If we can't maximize the moment we have them in that zone, we will ultimately fail. There are far too many choices for people when it comes to entertainment. Music and specifically the live music segment is just one of many options for people to consider. Technology is another huge aspect of Entertainment that is continuing to evolve. Fans and artists alike are demanding much more from venues and other platforms by which they can obtain entertainment. Make no mistake, there are many challenges we face in the Entertainment industry, but at the end of the day, it is a product that is truly defined by and controlled by the end user, the people. That is a good thing.

This has been just a taste in the day of the life of a Casino Entertainment executive, but whether you go out for the music or the comedy, do go out! I'd like to thank Judy and Chris for their time and excellent insights, and would like to hear from you with any comments or questions.

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