

# Casinos using fuel offers to ensure tourist flow

Casino companies are starting to hedge their bets in case rising fuel prices start keeping some visitors away.

To keep them coming, some Las Vegas casinos are offering gasoline giveaways and discounts.

Circus Circus, for example, sent out an electronic blast Monday announcing a free USD 25 gasoline card, featuring colorful pictures of young drivers.

The cards, handed out at check-in, include a USD 25 credit good at local gasoline stations, a USD 4 discount off the cost of admission to the Adventuredome Theme Park and a book of coupons worth USD 100. The cards are offered to guests who book a minimum two-night stay on the hotel's Web site.

Alan Feldman, spokesman for Circus Circus owner MGM Mirage, the largest casino operator on the Strip, said the program was designed to address growing customer concerns about the soaring price of gasoline.

Previously, all major hotel-casino operators have claimed that gasoline prices were not enough of a concern for customers to change their vacation plans.

Recently, gasoline prices in Southern California, where most of Las Vegas's drive-in business originates, have been hovering above USD 3 a gallon, up more than 75 cents a gallon, or 33 percent, in the past year.

„Recognizing that consumers may be thinking about altering their travel plans due to the price of gas, we have already launched at least one promotion with a gas-price theme and we are considering similar promotions at our other properties

that have a strong proportion of drive-in visitors," Feldman said.

MGM Mirage is offering similar programs at its properties in Primm – Whiskey Pete's, Buffalo Bill's and the Primm Valley Casino Hotel – where it also operates gasoline stations.

„What began as a summer promotion is now an ongoing part of the club. Basically customers can comp their own gas by using their (casino) points," Feldman said.

„Our July and August room offers will also include a gas voucher. This is a loyalty promotion based on a certain level of play. It will include room offers and gas," he said.

„At some of our other properties, we're looking at developing other promotions but have not firmed up anything definitive yet," Feldman said.

Harrah's Entertainment, the world's largest gaming company, has no similar marketing programs in place, said spokesman David Strow.

But executives at some individual Harrah's properties, who asked not to be named, said gasoline giveaway and discount programs are in the planning phase.

However, Imperial Palace, which for the past year has been owned and operated by Harrah's Entertainment, beat other Harrah's properties to the punch. It launched a direct mail campaign a few weeks ago for all Imperial Play Club members.

Imperial Palace spokeswoman Jackie Brett said the program is aimed at helping customers relieve some of the pressure they feel from increasing gasoline prices.

„The offer was for specific dates, June 19-30, and varying amounts from USD 50 to USD 150 on a gas card along with room offers," she said.

Similarly, Mark Sterbens, director of marketing at Terrible's Hotel and Casino, said his company has two programs in place.

„The first one is an earn-and-reward program where if you come to Terrible's any Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday or Saturday and play slots, we'll give you USD 5 in free gas for 1,000 points up to USD 15. If you earn 3,000 points playing slots, we'll give you USD 15 in gas free and you keep your points,“ he said.

The second program offers gasoline cards for redemption at all Terrible Herbst Chevron locations, and points earned in the casino can be used for gasoline, car washes, oil changes and other auto services.

In addition to its hotel-casino at Paradise and Flamingo, Herbst Gaming is a slot route operator, and its holding company, Terrible Herbst, owns and operates gasoline stations and car washes throughout the valley.

Brian Gordon, a partner in the Las Vegas-based consulting firm Applied Analysis, said the casino programs are probably more psychologically helpful than pocketbook friendly.

„It's an attempt to bond with customers and tell them, ‚We feel your pain,‘“ Gordon said.

Local operators with gasoline programs are joining an increasing number of hospitality industry companies nationwide that are using gasoline giveaways and discounts to help keep customers coming.

While lower-priced properties rather than premium hotel-casinos so far have led the way in Las Vegas, upscale resorts are joining the fray nationally.

For example, Loews Coronado Bay Resort and Spa in San Diego is offering visitors complimentary self-parking and gasoline credits when they book a USD 350 room for a night.