

LEADERS IN  
*Hospitality*

## Service Excellence

An Interview with Gillian Murphy, Senior Vice President and General Manager, MGM Grand at Foxwoods

**EDITORS' NOTE** Gillian Murphy was appointed to her current post in October 2007. Most recently, she was Vice President and Assistant General Manager of the Ameristar Casino property in Black Hawk, Colorado. Prior to that, Murphy was Vice President, Corporate Hotel Operations, for Harrah's Entertainment, Inc., in Las Vegas for three years. Between 1998 and 2004, she held the position of Vice President of Hotel Operations for Harrah's and Harveys Casino Hotels in Lake Tahoe, Nevada.



Gillian Murphy

Murphy has also played major roles at other properties in Virginia, New York, and Maryland. She holds a bachelor's degree in education from Bristol University in the United Kingdom.

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Situated in Mashantucket, Connecticut, MGM Grand at Foxwoods ([www.mgmatfoxwoods.com](http://www.mgmatfoxwoods.com)), opened in May 2008, is a stand-alone resort casino connected to the existing Foxwoods Resort Casino by a pedestrian concourse. Designed to "bring the outdoors in," the \$700 million MGM Grand reflects the beauty of the resort's natural surroundings through its exterior wall of windows. The 30-story property adds another two million square feet to the existing destination in the form of 825 guest rooms and suites, a 21,000-square-foot spa, the 4,000-seat MGM Grand Theater, casino, four restaurants, a nightclub, and approximately 120,000 square feet of meeting and convention space.

### Have you been happy with the initial excitement surrounding the opening of the MGM Grand at Foxwoods?

It has exceeded our expectations on several fronts, including customer feedback, industry comments, and positive press relations. And looking at our financial performance, we're where we need to be – attracting target accretive customers. It is certainly a challenging time to be opening a new property.

### How do you define the property's target clientele?

It complements the existing Foxwoods customer base, which is generally 25 to 50 years of age, youthful in their interests and environments, and looking for a certain lifestyle in which entertainment is a cornerstone. It works well for the New York market, which was underpenetrated by the gaming-centric Foxwoods



brand. Approximately 30 percent of MGM customers come from New York, whereas Foxwoods is close to 10 percent, so a strong complementary market is developing.

### What can guests expect of the MGM Grand at Foxwoods?

The goal of this property was to address the offerings that Foxwoods, as the largest gaming facility in the world, hitherto had not explored. The property has broader nongaming offerings, such as a 4,000-seat theater, which is terrific in its design and acoustics. We have terraces on all our restaurants. We have a wonderful outdoor pool with cabanas and Jacuzzis. Our spa provides fitness equipment, sun terraces, and a lap pool. We wanted to create a Vegas-like experience in our lounge and restaurants, so we brought in Tom Colicchio and Michael Schlow, as well as Junior's restaurant cheesecakes, and our Shrine nightclub has a capacity of 1,200. We're also adding more retail stores. Overall, the resort has two million square feet, and only 50,000 of it is dedicated to gaming. We're already getting support from high-profile personalities and celebrities.

### What sort of meeting space can be found at the property?

We have about 120,000 square feet of meeting space, which provides us with mid-week corporate business that complements our leisure-centric weekend business. Within that space, you can have an intimate cocktail party or accommodate 3,800 people in our ballroom. We offer beautiful outdoor dining areas, as well as an exclusive executive boardroom with a \$250,000 interactive WebEx table. Our meeting spaces are positioned conveniently between the price points you'd find in Boston and New York.

### Have you been pleased with the team you've been able to assemble?

Very happy. That said, it took a great deal of work on the part of our leadership team and outside training group to help us define our service culture. We introduced a behavioral assessment tool to help screen potential candidates for the right attitudes and skills for 1,800 jobs. After 120 days, we had 20,000 applications. We also

put together a strong training program. We hire people based on their behavior and then train them in the necessary skills, and we've built a portfolio of service culture stories – stories of people who are doing amazing things in anticipating guests' needs and taking care of customers. We have a fabulous, spectacular product, but our team members build the relationships that bring our customers back.

### What technological amenities are offered at the property?

We offer free WiFi through the building. Customers can also order room service on the television. That said, we always provide our customers with options. So we have check-in kiosks, but there are also service professionals at the front desk. We give customers the opportunity to select what they're comfortable with. We are in the hospitality business, and we don't want to lose touch with the art of making somebody feel welcome.

### What excited you about the opportunity to lead this property?

Leading a group of 2,500 people to deliver a five-diamond service standard in a premier property is tremendously satisfying. I've spent half my career in luxury hotels and the other half in gaming. This property has a foot in both places.

### Gaming is a male-dominated industry. Are enough young women coming into this industry?

I believe so. In my current position and as a member of Women in Lodging, it is my responsibility to mentor women. This is an industry where we can do very well and complement the skills that men bring to the industry. You have to understand where you want to go and be willing and brave enough to seize opportunities and show your capabilities.

### Your business operates around the clock. How do you find a work/life balance?

It would be hard to even understand what balance is when you love what you do. I get such satisfaction from my work. It's a great industry for anyone to consider. ●

*The MGM Grand Center Bar*