Casinos Tighten Security with Network Video Solution

By Harold German

The American Gaming Association (AGA) estimates that gambling is a $100 billion industry in the United States. The AGA also estimated that in 2006, gaming casinos provided over 354,000 jobs, and yearly state and local tax revenue of $5.2 billion.

Poker, a card game that is responsible for luring millions of people to casinos, has enjoyed surging popularity in the last decade and has served as a key catalyst in increasing casino revenue. While gaming casinos haven't escaped the reach of the world's economic slowdown, their onsite assets dwarf those of many other industries. Their sizeable coffers fund various investments in new equipment, technology, construction, furniture and infrastructure, among others. With all of these assets, and given the volume of cash that is kept onsite, gaming casinos face unique security challenges every day.

One of these casinos is the Black Bart Casino, which is located in Mendocino County, California. With a gaming space of approximately 9,000 square feet, the casino is packed with 220 gaming machines, numerous card tables and a favorite local restaurant by the name of Creekside Café. Employing over 260 people and with a total capacity of 1200 stay-over guests, Black Bart Casino draws in crowds of gaming enthusiasts looking to score the next big jackpot. Keeping track of so many people can be a daunting challenge, which is why video surveillance has become an integral part of every casino security system in North America. Of course, video surveillance equipment has been in use for many years by the casinos. As a result, casinos are often faced with revamping legacy technology that now fails to deliver the level of performance that today's casinos require.
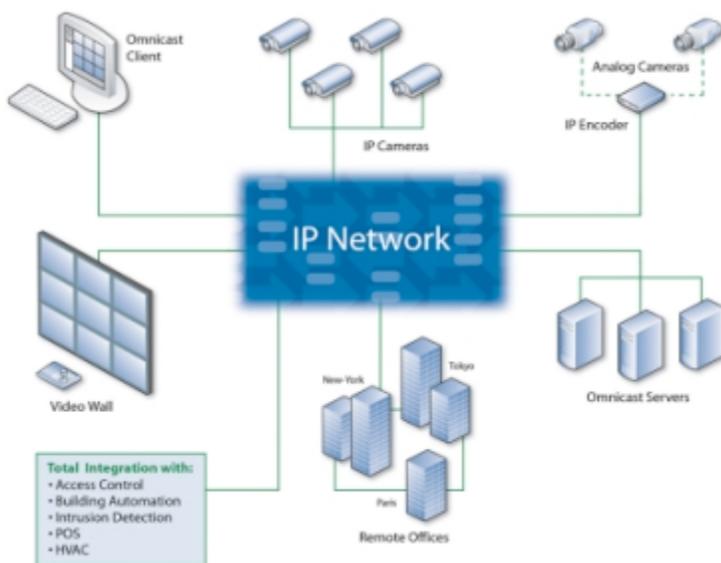
The Black Bart Casino's problem of dealing with outdated equipment was not uncommon. Any time incidents on their casino floor occurred, security staff took on the tedious process of having to remove a VCR tape, rewind it, search for the incident in question and also make sure to put a replacement tape back into the VCR recorder. Needless to say, these delays in investigative procedures obstructed security staff to act swiftly in case of urgent security issues, such as table fraud, visitations by blacklisted patrons, or deceitful cash or key exchanges. Such considerable security inefficiencies were among the main topics of discussion when it came time for the casino upcoming expansion.

In vast environments such as casinos, which contain massive square footage, large crowds and the regular flow of large sums of cash, implementing a major security system overhaul is a decision that is not made swiftly. It was all up to Kani Neves, Executive Director of the Sherwood Valley Gaming Commission, to research all the technologies available on the market in order to find the most optimal solution for the current and future needs of Black Bart Casino. "We were looking for a solution that would allow us to stay up-to-date with the latest advancements in technology, and from an observational and surveillance standpoint, increase our ability to respond to incidents more efficiently," said Neves.

In his exhaustive search, Neves reviewed digital VCR solutions, DVR solutions and several advanced IP-based virtual matrix solutions, but wasn't able to find a system that would give his team the tools to be expeditious in responding to time-sensitive incidents. He was also looking for a technologically advanced system that would also be flexible enough to allow him to keep some existing hardware assets, and enable him to grow the system seamlessly in the future when the new 50,000 square foot facility would be ready.

Neves eventually visited a nearby casino that was using an advanced IP surveillance solution; Omnicast from Genetec. After witnessing all of the benefits of the IP-based system, he decided to implement it for Black Bart Casino. The new system fulfilled all of Black Bart Casino's needs and was the perfect fit for their security team, providing them with much more system functionalities than before. Initially the 170 existing analog Pelco cameras were integrated on the virtual matrix system, and another 25 new IP cameras were installed in other sensitive areas of the casino. The entire system runs off three servers, including the use of one failover server for an additional backup of archived video. "The flexibility of the system is key," said Neves. "The fact that Omnicast can manage an originally analog-based system and then can still give us the ability to move comfortably into the future as everything goes IP-based is certainly a great advantage to have."

As a result of having previously used the VCR-based technology, the Black Bart Casino security staff was initially intimidated by the advanced technology, however, they soon realized how easy it was to maneuver though the intuitive interface, as well as how simple it was to implement their policies and procedures into the system. "The interface was a huge huge bonus," said Neves. "There are multiple ways of doing one or two different functions, allowing for so much adaptability. If one person wants to use the mouse to control the PTZ, or the keyboard, they have that option. And if some operators are not comfortable with the new technology, they still even have the option of using the old joystick. Simply put, you can really custom-fit yourself to the system."

In addition to the flexibility and user-friendliness of the new system, Black Bart Casino's security team quickly took advantage of its other cutting-edge features. They began using the advanced alarm notifications and motion detection integration to monitor areas, such as cashier posts and highly sensitive entry and exit points throughout the facility. For the table games that were intended to be monitored 24 hours per day, they used Omnicast's dynamic boost quality functionality to configure cameras to CIF resolution when there was no detected motion, and then 4CIF when motion was triggered within the video. Using this functionality allowed the staff to archive more pertinent data in higher quality, as well as secure significant bandwidth savings.

The new system's operators have also become accustomed to using the remote access capabilities of the system. Since only commissioners can approve jackpots won over $10,000, Omnicast's remote access feature has proven to be extremely beneficial, as authorities can access video directly from their homes to approve such wins or even review other video where suspicion or foul play may have been involved. Additionally, in case of unidentifiable technical issues, their integrator, Connections IT of Santa Rosa, Calif., can also remotely connect to the system to identify problems and provide immediate support.

"From an observation and surveillance standpoint, the work is going to be the same. Just the tools that we have to be able to do things, to respond quicker, and to look into events expeditiously are much more advanced. The new system has enhanced everything that we were trying to do." The tangible benefits of the new system are becoming more obvious. They have been able to immediately validate complaints that had been raised by patrons, as well as spot blacklisted customers, and catch visitors who play club member cards that are accidentally left in machines. Dealing with VCR tapes is a thing of the past, and the ease of archiving and retrieving video is an additional feature the casino came to benefit from as well. "If the operator happens not to catch [an incident] while watching the video footage, the ease of going back through the archive, pulling it up on screen almost instantaneously and letting the security personnel know the details as they walk out to address the situation, has helped us improve our response times," said Neves.

According to Neves, the flexibility of Omnicast's open-architecture platform has been the most important benefit for Black Bart Casino. "We needed a system that would conform to our existing setup with analog and coax cables everywhere, give us the ease and flexibility of new technology but yet also, would be able to expand and adapt to our new casino and new environment," said Neves. "The new solution has enabled us to continue to grow and be a part of the new technology of the near future, and that is a big asset." The Black Bart Casino will need to triple the amount of cameras in their current location, which the new system can accommodate. The Black Bart Casino plans to build the brand-new facility with an additional 400 game tables and more commercial areas, such as sports bars and restaurants.

Harold German is a renowned author and contributor, with appearances on CNN and in noted international publications, such as The Economist. German covers IP networks and the future of IT. German is a senior writer for Partner Service Sites.

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