



Michael Soll

President, The Innovation Group



During the early days of gaming expansion, The Innovation Group was one of the major consulting companies that casinos turned to for feasibility studies and marketing analysis. Michael Soll spent several years with the company in those days, and returned five years ago after stints with Caesars Entertainment and Hard Rock.

Now, as president of the company, Soll is navigating a new world of market saturation and limited expansion to provide tribal, commercial and international casino companies with a path forward to organic growth. Soll spoke with *GGB* Publisher Roger Gros. For a full podcast of this interview, visit GGBMagazine.com.

GGB: The Innovation Group has had an exciting year, with lots of success and accomplishments. What stands out for you?

Michael Soll: We really solidified our fourth partner and our Las Vegas presence through Brian Wyman. His joining us as a partner is symbolic of the major shifts we've had under way for the last four or five years, moving into data analytics and marketing analytics, which has become our window into most new technologies and gaming platforms, whether it's online, sports betting or traditional operations.

We also were honored to be selected by Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to provide, with our partners at RMC Legal, much of the background research they relied on for their "Gaming in the Commonwealth" report. Market analysis and feasibility has long been the bread and butter of this company, and it was fulfilling to bring that expertise to a new category of client.

And, of course, through our relationship with *GGB*, we've had a stellar response to this year's Emerging Leaders program. These young leaders are really starting to interact with one another through get-togethers and meetups at different conferences all over the world. It's very organic.

The class this year was really special. The fact

that we had to choose from 200 nominees was pretty amazing, and the level of people who were nominated, or even nominated themselves, was really high. I'm really happy with the way it turned out this year.

You mentioned Brian Wyman. Who are your other partners?

Interestingly, we have a partner per office. Brian is in Las Vegas. Tom Zitt, a longtime partner with the company, still works out of our original office in New Orleans. He drives the majority of our domestic business. He's in tune with about half of the tribes we work with, particularly in the Eastern U.S. In Denver, the office is led by Michael Zhu, our partner who handles most of our business in Asia.

I'm still based in Orlando, handling both Latin America and Europe from there. So, we have a geographic approach to handling the industry's global needs.

What major challenges will operators, manufacturers and governments face in the near future?

Starting from the government side, which affects everything else, and a lack of new greenfield markets—places like Virginia, Japan and maybe one day Brazil—you've got governments that are looking at their gaming product and asking how much they can squeeze in. This is what we saw in Illinois and Pennsylvania last year. The key questions they're asking are reciprocal to what the industry is asking: How much capital can we invest? Where can we invest it? And how much additional exposure in a market is an advantage to us, as either a defensive strategy or an offensive strategy? Governments are asking: How much can we absorb, and what types of gaming should we be offering, even if it's just layering in sports betting?

How about players? Can you expand the pool of players from any one group?

I don't find the characterization of the new group

of players as millennials useful anymore. It's almost become a term that's too vague to explain the challenges the industry faces. We've done some survey work on this recently, about what amenities are valued now, outside of gaming. How popular are they among guests? Who are the drivers? Also, we included all kinds of questions about skill games and esports.

Our view is: Be flexible, have enough floor space to try things that are hitting the market, and don't assume that every potential future player is the same as every other potential future player.

How can a company like The Innovation Group help established casino companies and manufacturers understand these challenges and develop solutions, particularly if they don't have those kinds of experts in-house?

There are several routes. The tools we use are relatively similar, although they've evolved in terms of how we deal with data, database analysis and loyalty programs. But as far as answering these questions, it's about research, in the sense of survey research and taking temperatures and benchmarking.

It's also about qualitative research—sitting in rooms with people from different demographics and player groups in different countries, and seeing what they believe a gaming property should offer. What do they believe the online experience is like, compared to the bricks-and-mortar experience? And where do they draw lines around a social experience versus a personal experience?

The research we do builds a database of research around these areas. So, as we did with our early feasibility work and tracking penetration, we're building a history and benchmarks around these attitudes and trends. When we start to segment them by age group, by nationality, by jurisdiction, by ethnicity within the market, we start to have trends that we can watch.