

Why Las Vegas Is Smart: Intellectual Capital and the Gaming Law Community

By Bo Bernhard, Ph.D.



This past April 11th, UNLV hosted its first-ever TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) event. If you are unfamiliar with TED Talks, they are very much worth a Google – but be sure you have set aside an afternoon beforehand. The TED concept is simple and addictive: present a big idea worth sharing, in a short burst. TED Talks have achieved something rare: they have become a darling of both the intelligentsia and the general public, in a genuine effort to “elevate the conversation” (again, a rare thing in internet-land).

Some no doubt scoffed at the notion that a TED event could even be held in a place – Las Vegas – that many consider a vast intellectual wasteland. To counter that popular (mis?)perception, the event organizers asked me to deliver a TED Talk on why Las Vegas, contrary to oft-expressed popular wisdom, is actually smart.

Now, as all of us would concede, Las Vegas famously falls short on many of the familiar “smart” metrics – from book readership to graduate degrees. These measures are depressing to those who care about the city, and they are important.

But perhaps a focus on these conventional measures misses out on something. Perhaps it’s much like the criticism I often hear of today’s university students: whenever I share, in mixed company, that I work as a university professor, someone in the group inevitably expresses mock condolences. After all, “kids these days” are reputed to be notoriously apathetic, and in contrast to college generations past who marched on Washington, today’s students are nowhere to be found in mass protests that occupy our streets.

But those who would train their television lenses on the streets, waiting to film the university crowds who might amass to fight the good fight, shoulder to shoulder and shouter to shouter, will miss out on all of the new political activity taking place in the blogosphere, or on Twitter, or in other social and technological spaces. Our lenses have not widened sufficiently to televise these revolutions, and hence those who focus solely on yesterday’s metrics end up with an incomplete understanding of what it means for college students to be politically active today.

It’s the same thing with intelligence. While for years we relied upon metrics like IQ and SAT scores to measure “smarts,” new research by important scholars (and popular TED Talkers) like Daniel Goleman and Shirzad Chamine (Google them!) teach us that in many spheres of life, of love, and of work, social intelligence is more important than conventionally-measured forms of intelligence.

This makes sense to just about anyone who inhabits our social universe: being able to read people is at least as important as being able to read Goethe, and the science of smart is now recognizing and measuring this. Brain scientists are uncovering important and microscopic workings of the brain, noting that brain cells called “mirror neurons” fire when we observe and empathize with other humans. While it must be emphasized that this is a science that is only beginning to emerge, perhaps as we start to understand these cells better we might begin to think of them as “hospitality neurons” – after all, whose mirror neurons are firing more often than a front desk employee or waiter “reading” a customer?

And where are these neurons firing quite like they are in Las Vegas – a place that welcomes 40 million people over to dinner each year, and then constantly reads, interprets, and responds to their needs? Meanwhile, here’s an interesting new observation about brain circuitry: because “neurons that fire together wire together,” it turns out that the brain often acts much like a muscle -- becoming more efficient, stronger, more intelligent even, when engaged in frequent use. As such, we might think about how often these mirror neurons are firing among those who work on the Las Vegas Strip – the single most visited plot of earth on the planet – and maybe, just maybe, these Las Vegans are smart (and getting smarter) in ways we are only beginning to understand.

So if social intelligence is the new way to be smart, and if brain scientists are starting to understand how neurons that fire together wire together, it would seem that our scientific understanding of intelligence is bending in the direction of Las Vegas (and its many hospitality employees).

Beyond the innermost workings of the brain, however, there is more evidence in our search for intelligent life in the Las Vegas universe. Consider the ways in which evolutionary scientists think about intelligence. At this level of analysis, intelligence is adaptability. Individuals and groups who are able to recognize the emergence of, say, an ice age – and then figure out a way to adapt and reinvent in response – are particularly well suited to last longer than those who do not do so.

If intelligence is adaptability, then, think again about Las Vegas – a place that famously adapts and reinvents itself constantly, in response to threats of ice ages, moralizers, and competition alike. While this is a level of analysis far beyond the scope of traditional evolutionary biology, if Las Vegas’ strength is that it constantly reinvents itself, this would seem to be a very intelligent thing to do for any entity wishing to survive in the long term.

There are many other reasons why Las Vegas is smart (to learn more, Google the TED Talk!), but I would conclude here with a global consideration – one that pays tribute to the readership of this publication. This consideration

recognizes those people who helped invent a form of legal intelligence that has since spread around the world – people like my pioneering mentor-friends Bob Faiss and Shannon Bybee.

In many ways, Las Vegas is the Houston of the Gaming Industry – because Houston is the global intellectual capital of the world’s energy industry (even as the energy industry has “moved” from under Houston’s feet to every continent on the planet). Down in Texas, this plays out in countless ways: for instance, when the world has a complex engineering question, it typically turns to Houston for answers – because engineers in Houston’s energy industry have solved some of the world’s most complex energy problems (extracting energy in an almost-unfathomable array of ways) for a generation now.

So it goes with Nevada’s gaming lawyers, to whom the world turns whenever it finds itself perplexed by a complex legal question pertaining to gaming. If Las Vegas is the global intellectual capital of gaming, its gaming law community perhaps reveals this status best, as this is the place where the gaming world turns for legal advice, even as our products have spread from our backyard to the rest of the planet.

For its part, the rest of the gaming world has been all too happy to take advantage of the perspectives on law that have been invented here, battle-tested in the Battle Born state, and then exported to grateful masses who live in faraway places. In a rapidly globalizing world economy, this kind of border-crossing intelligence proves particularly crucial, especially for cities that seek “intellectual capital” status.

So the next time you meet someone who scoffs at Las Vegas’ lack of intellectual acumen – you tell them that Las Vegas actually reveals much about the new ways to be smart, and that Nevada’s gaming lawyers are helping lead the way.

After spending his childhood in Las Vegas, Dr. Bo Bernhard attended Harvard University, where he was a double major, a two-sport athlete, and a near-constant braggart about his home state of Nevada. This fall, he will begin his seventeenth year of teaching and researching at UNLV.



Dr. Bernhard speaking at TEDxUNLV
on April 11, 2014