

ATLANTIC CITY - Bob Griffin got a pretty strong job reference from a man who knows a thing or two about hiring and firing in the corporate world.

"I gave him an A-plus recommendation," said Donald Trump, who anoints the winner of his NBC reality show "The Apprentice" with the words "you're hired" and famously dismisses losing contestants with a brusque "you're fired."

Griffin, 51, was never a contestant on the reality show, but in effect he has become a real-life apprentice by taking over as the new chief executive officer of Trump Entertainment Resorts Inc. The company owns three Atlantic City casinos and controls about 20 percent of the nation's second-largest gaming market.

The Trump casinos have been tainted by bouts with bankruptcy, huge losses and a dizzying succession of CEOs in the past 10 years. Griffin's daunting task is to revive the Trump brand in Atlantic City's slumping market.

"He's got a great vision for the company," Trump said. "He's a great manager, he's a great person and he'll do a great job."

Griffin took charge in November after his predecessor, Mark Juliano, was sacked in a management shake-up orchestrated by corporate bondholders who bought Trump Entertainment out of bankruptcy last year for \$225 million. Bondholders gave Trump a 10 percent stake in the company in exchange for the continued use of his name on the casinos.

As the new boss, Griffin has wasted no time in restructuring the operations and cutting costs. On his first day on the job, he laid off 50 managers. In December, he followed up with 250 more layoffs affecting managers and front-line employees.

"When you have to let someone go for economic reasons that aren't tied to job performance, that's extremely difficult," Griffin explained of the layoffs.

New Trump CEO charged with revitalizing casinos after bankruptcy - Press of Atlantic City

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Jobs cuts are but one part of Trump Entertainment's post-bankruptcy restructuring. The company emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection last July, slashing its debt from a suffocating \$1.7 billion to a more manageable \$344 million.

Hoping to turn things around, Griffin and the bondholders plan to upgrade the flagship Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, possibly bring in a joint venture partner to invest in the aging Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino and sell off Trump Marina Hotel Casino.

Andrew Zarnett, a gaming analyst with Deutsche Bank, said one of Griffin's top priorities should be Trump Marina's sale. Trump Marina suffered a \$3.4 million operating loss through the first three quarters of 2010 and is at the bottom of Atlantic City's casino industry for gaming revenue, taking in \$137.3 million through November.

Zarnett said the Marina's sale will rid Trump Entertainment of its weakest casino and allow Griffin to concentrate on drawing customers to the two remaining Boardwalk properties.

"The company had a really rough year going through bankruptcy. With a little care and focus, Mr. Griffin should be able to do a great job improving the cash flow of the company," Zarnett said.

Griffin noted there are currently no offers for Trump Marina. Trump Entertainment has been talking to would-be buyers. Griffin did not disclose their names, saying only that they include casino operators and former gaming executives who are trying to put together investment groups.

"For now, I'll be approaching the Marina like I'm going to be operating it for years," Griffin said, vowing that the casino will not shut down. "But if it sells, that's great. We'll take the money and pay down debt."

In 2008, New York-based Coastal Marina LLC reached a tentative deal to buy Trump Marina for \$316 million and wanted to rebrand it into a Margaritaville-themed casino in partnership with singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett. The price tag was later reduced to \$270 million before the deal

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fell apart in 2009. Reflecting Atlantic City's current real estate crisis, Trump has been discussing the Marina's possible sale for \$75 million in recent months.

Griffin got to know Trump Marina when he worked there in the 1990s as executive director of hotel operations. He served as director of catering services at Trump Plaza in the late 1980s.

He started his gaming career 30 years ago as a banquet manager at the old Golden Nugget casino, now the Atlantic City Hilton Casino Resort. His time in the casino industry has taken him all over the country and world. In addition to Atlantic City, he has helped run or oversee casino projects in Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Ohio, Colorado, West Virginia, Louisiana, Nevada, Iowa, Florida, the Bahamas, the United Kingdom and Singapore.

Before he returned to the Trump organization, Griffin was the president and CEO of MTR Gaming Group Inc., which owns and operates casinos and racetracks in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio. Prior to MTR, he was senior vice president of operations at Isle of Capri Casinos Inc., an outfit best known as a riverboat casino operator.

Zarnett said Griffin established a reputation as a skilled executive during his time at MTR and Isle of Capri, two regional gaming operators. Griffin's jump to Atlantic City now puts him in the major leagues of the casino world. However, the economic meltdown and intense competition from rival casinos in Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and Connecticut have made it difficult for Atlantic City's gaming halls.

"What's changed our marketing in Atlantic City is Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York and Connecticut," Griffin said of the growing competition. "With the convenience of gambling around the region and the country, we have to find different ways to bring people into the city."

Griffin plans to attract new business to the Trump casinos by targeting lucrative customers through the company's database. The company will also use its chief asset, the Taj Mahal, to aggressively pursue conventions. The Taj will be spruced up with new nongaming amenities, such as upscale restaurants. On the casino side, new slot machines are planned.

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Trump, meanwhile, is promising to do his part by offering his star power to help the casinos.

"I'll be there a lot if Bob wants me for special events and other things. I'll love to do that," Trump said. "I will be in Atlantic City. I have a great relationship with Atlantic City. I'll be in Atlantic City as much as Bob wants me to."

Ultimately, the plan is to spread the Trump brand outside of Atlantic City through the acquisition of existing casinos in other gaming markets. Griffin stressed that the company will be hunting for bargains.

"I want to find small, distressed properties with good potential for cash flow," he said. "It's not always about having the best or sexiest building in the city. It's about generating free cash flow."

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