

Q&A

Preferred Hotel Group grants property independence for curated atmospheres

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By JOE MCCARTHY

Preferred Hotel Group is leveraging its largely hands-off model to empower hotels seeking greater independence, while still developing a strong central network.

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The hospitality brand is in the process of scaling its loyalty programs and mobile offerings. As the hotel chain continues to expand, maintaining a flexible model will promote cross-property travel and create a cohesive brand image.

"Preferred Hotel Group has gained great momentum over the past few years, so my immediate plan is to build on those successes to drive greater achievements on behalf of the company and set the tone for future decades of success," said Lindsey Ueberroth, CEO and president of Preferred Hotel Group, Orange County, CA.

"By 2019, I am confident that Preferred Hotel Group will be seen as an iconic global hospitality brand," she said.

"Consumers will recognize Preferred Hotel Group as the resource when they are looking for one-of-a-kind, carefully curated, independent hotel experiences across the globe."



Preferred Hotel Group represents 650 independent hotels, resorts and serviced residences in 85 countries.

In this Q & A, Ms. Ueberroth discusses her plans for the brand, international expansion and the challenges associated with navigating a changing hospitality landscape.

What are your immediate plans for Preferred Hotel Group?

Preferred Hotel Group has gained great momentum over the past few years, so my immediate plan is to build on those successes to drive greater achievements on behalf of the company and set the tone for future decades of success. We have seen a huge swing in more hotels wanting to go the independent route after recognizing the benefits of Preferred Hotel Group's model, so supporting these properties as they transition from a hard-flag brand to an independent model will be a major focus. In addition, I plan to execute on new developments that facilitate global growth of the Preferred Hotel Group brand, drive financial success for the company and its partners, and keep Preferred Hotel Group at the forefront of the industry, especially as it relates to global trends like the growing Chinese travel market.

What are some of the obstacles facing hotel chains when expanding to new markets?

The key obstacles for hotels when they are entering into new markets are, typically, a lack of local knowledge and connections and a poorly thought-out business plan.

How has the iPrefer loyalty program transformed the guest experience?

iPrefer is the first global, points-based loyalty program for independent hotels. With more than 450 properties worldwide participating in the program, iPrefer has just as many hotels for travelers to experience as many of the large chains. This global reach gives our guests the opportunity to experience independent hotels and resorts that reflect the local flavor and authentic personality of their chosen destination, in addition to receiving points, VIP treatment, and status as they stay within the Preferred Hotel Group brand. We have always had a base of loyal guests, and now we have the opportunity to really recognize and reward them for their loyalty.

How important are recruitment and training programs for the brand?

Recruitment and training remain critical for Preferred Hotel Group as a company. In certain parts of the world, it can be more difficult to recruit good talent because it is so competitive and candidates have a lot of opportunity (China, for example). We place a heavy focus and a lot of energy on retention of good talent, and training plays a big role

in these efforts. We continue to evolve our training programs to ensure our associates are on the cutting edge of industry, technology, distribution, and marketing trends. Associates want to know we are investing in them and their long-term growth. These training programs are examples of how we show our commitment to them in ways that title and salary alone cannot accomplish.

In what ways are boutique properties and home-sharing services disrupting the hospitality industry?

With continuous growth in the multi-generational and family travel segments, the home sharing services provide a product and service that make it easy and cost-effective for guests traveling in large groups to stay together. These multi-generational and family travelers want multiple rooms and a communal place to meet as a group, such as a kitchen to make dining together more comfortable, especially if younger children are involved. Most hotels either don't have enough large suites or connecting rooms or offer residential style products to accommodate this market. On the boutique side, these types of properties, due to their size, can provide highly customized, high-tech services to satisfy the growing demands of savvy travelers that are much more difficult for a large hotel to offer in the same authentic way. And, boutique properties can offer these services at a price point that competes with the big-box chains.

How much does mobile factor into the brand's marketing efforts?

We continue to see mobile as one of the fastest growing channels, so this is an important area of focus for Preferred Hotel Group. In April 2013, we launched mobile channels for all of our brand websites. While many companies have gone to mobile-only tactics, Preferred Hotel Group has not done this, as we believe guests should receive the same information regardless of what device they choose to use.

Where do you see Preferred Hotel Group in five years?

By 2019, I am confident that Preferred Hotel Group will be seen as an iconic global hospitality brand. Consumers will recognize Preferred Hotel Group as the resource when they are looking for one-of-a-kind, carefully curated, independent hotel experiences across the globe. In five years, I see Preferred Hotel Group representing close to 1,000 hotels in more than 100 countries, which will allow us to provide even more options to our discerning guests wherever and whenever they are traveling on business or for pleasure.

Final take

Joe McCarthy, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York

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