

LEADERS IN  
*Hospitality*

## Creating a Brand Promise

An Interview with Gail R. Isono,  
General Manager, The Huntington Hotel and Nob Hill Spa

**EDITORS' NOTE** Gail Isono joined The Huntington Hotel in 1990 as a Sales Manager and quickly advanced to Director of Sales and Marketing and then to General Manager. With more than 25 years' experience in the hospitality industry, she is the first woman to serve in the top post of the 85-year-old property.



Gail R. Isono

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Built in 1924 as one-bedroom apartments atop San Francisco's prestigious Nob Hill, The Huntington Hotel ([www.huntingtonhotel.com](http://www.huntingtonhotel.com)) now offers 135 guest rooms and suites, which are decorated in an understated yet elegant style. Amenities include complimentary chauffeured transportation to Union Square and the Financial District and access to Nob Hill Spa and the spa's indoor pool, Jacuzzi, and eucalyptus-infused steam rooms. The Huntington Hotel also features the award-winning Big 4 Restaurant. Owned by Nob Hill Properties, Inc., the plush hotel is a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide and Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

**How have the luxury and travel sectors, and specifically The Huntington Hotel and Nob Hill Spa in San Francisco, been affected by the economic crisis?**

I've opened my eyes even more to what we are doing to best take care of the guests, and to find out if we are succeeding. I think guests appreciate The Huntington even more knowing that travel budgets are being cut and corporations are not spending as much on travel. It becomes even more important for us to take care of people who are traveling so they know there's consistency when they're staying here. A guest once said when you leave The Huntington, it's like you're walking out with a brand-new suit on, because you feel really good, and when you go out the door, you feel like you can take care of the world. That's the feeling we try to give our guests.

**How does the business break out in terms of corporate versus leisure?**

We don't have a large corporate segment so in some respects, in this market, it's not as big of a challenge for us as for other hotels that depend on the corporate markets. It's about 20 percent of our market mix. The corporate

people we do have, however, come back whenever they have special occasions because they know we'll take care of their guests when they're entertaining.

**How has the décor of your rooms and suites evolved over the years?**

When I started here 18 years ago, no two rooms were decorated the same way. We've since had to do some of the rooms in very similar décor, but we're also doing co-op marketing with other companies who have a similar branding style. We're renovating more rooms with the goal of providing a residential and homelike feel.

**How much of a focus is the spa for the property, and are you focused on drawing in the local community?**

The local people in the Bay Area really embraced the Nob Hill Spa when it opened eight years ago. On the weekends, it's more of a day spa, and during the week, we have our regular customers and corporate guests. It's a nice balance of both worlds. We're also focusing on bringing more spa elements to the hotel, like warm oshibori towels upon arrival.

**Is it challenging to be successful as a hotel restaurant?**

The Big 4 Restaurant is such a special place because the clientele believe in it. It's a place where people meet and feel comfortable. It's kind of like being in old-world San Francisco. It's a place where executives can feel very confident in the service, and a group of up-and-coming executives can get together and have a great time. The challenge is bringing in more new customers, welcoming them, and making them feel like it's their turn now.

**How have you been so effective at retaining talent at your property?**

It's all about people. If we had this building just by itself, it would mean nothing. The reason I would tell anyone to stay at The Huntington is the people. What we look at in hiring is someone with heart and character who wants to please and serve. At the heart of our brand promise is that we'll take care of you, and every guest who walks through that door is being welcomed home, and everyone who works here believes it.

**Has the word luxury lost some of its meaning through overuse, and is it hard to define luxury?**

The word luxury is overused. To me, luxury is the simple elegance of being taken care of. We always take care of the customer. People in the hotel and travel industry advertise that their focus is the customer, but the customer then tends to become just a reservation or a room number. They forget about the person. We never take our eye off that, and that has never been the case at the Huntington.

**Do you maintain communication throughout the year with regular clients to keep them updated on the property?**

We're putting a lot of effort into our new Web site. We change it on a regular basis to let people know about Huntington happenings, which makes people feel they are a part of this building. We feel they are a part of us whether they're here or not.

**How critical has the owner/manager relationship been to your success?**

I am very fortunate that this is a family-owned property. Here, the concept of treating everyone like family – whether employees, guests, or the family members themselves – is paramount. It is so rare to have a family-owned hotel, and to have it continue to thrive after all these years with one vision – to keep everybody here as family – is very special.

**How has the role of the hotelier changed over time?**

You have to be curious all the time, and you have to keep growing in knowledge. You have to keep up with technology, but you also have to be curious enough to learn about it, how it affects you, and what to do to utilize it.

**Has being with this property for 18 years made it easier to maintain a work/life balance, or is that impossible in this industry?**

No matter what industry you're in, achieving balance is always challenging. You're never far away from work when you have a BlackBerry. There are times when I'm able to spend more time with family, and there are times when work needs to be done. That's just part of what I do. As long as you embrace it altogether, you can have a good balance.

**If you were not in this business, can you imagine what you would be doing?**

I always wanted to be in this business, but just didn't know specifically where it would lead. There's so much to come, and I'm always looking forward to what's next. ●

*The Huntington pool*

