

Delivering on Promises



An Interview with Eric O. Long, General Manager, The Waldorf=Astoria

EDITORS' NOTE *Eric Long has been a Hilton veteran for more than 30 years and held key management positions in New Jersey, Florida, and the Midwest before moving to The Waldorf=Astoria in 1994.*



Eric O. Long

PROPERTY BRIEF *Originally opened on Fifth Avenue in 1893, The Waldorf=Astoria (www.waldorfnewyork.com) has occupied its present Park Avenue site since 1931. It is one of New York's premier luxury hotels and offers a choice of 1,246 rooms and suites. The Waldorf Towers features an additional 101 suites and 79 executive guest rooms and employs a separate entrance and staff. The property is owned by Hilton Worldwide (NYSE: HLT), based in Beverly Hills, California.*

What impact have you seen on the travel and tourism industry as a result of the economic crisis?

People in general, are simply more "value" conscious than at any point in my personal memory. Group accounts are planning fewer food and beverage events than before, electing to offer a coffee break in the morning rather than a continental or full American breakfast, and there are fewer receptions and lighter break offerings. Guest room and suite rates must be competitive with other venues, even though customers recognize and confirm that our product offering is clearly superior. In addition, businesses in general have placed more restrictions on their travelers in an effort to control costs. As a result of these challenges, there is a keen awareness on our team that we must earn our customers' support every single day.

What is the current state of the hotel business in New York City?

While hotel occupancies have bounced back to very near what they were at the peak of business activity, guest room and suite rates have not yet returned. There is no significant new supply coming into the market and, with the strength of international and domestic travel, we are hopeful that rates will rebound even though it may take 12 to 24 months to return to the levels we once enjoyed.

How do you differentiate your property in such a competitive market?

First, it's about staying close to our existing customer base and finding out what they need and expect from us. Our Sales and Operating Teams must be fully aligned – it's all about execution.

Second, it's about market diversification. We are focused on the needs of multiple industries and refuse to allow ourselves to be overly vulnerable to one or even a handful of specific market segments. It comes down to spotting the growth markets before others do.

Most important of all is exceptional customer service. Businesses in general, and certainly hotel operators, have been forced to rethink their business models. New operating structures and leaner teams are a reflection of today's business reality. It is more important than ever for us to deliver on our promises – to field an exceptional team and one that is focused on results.

How broad is your accommodation offering?

The Waldorf=Astoria and The Waldorf Towers provide customers with an unmatched range of luxury product lines, which includes two levels of guest room accommodations in The Waldorf=Astoria and two additional levels in The Waldorf Towers. We also offer six distinct suite product lines, ranging from smaller residential style suites to luxury apartments – this is a key differentiator for us and why we are able to appeal to a wide variety of customers, from a prominent film personality to someone hosting a meeting with their board of directors, to a single business traveler or to someone traveling for personal leisure.

How extensive is your food and beverage offering for guests?

Here again, we are somewhat unique in today's hotel environment. Rather than a single restaurant offering, we provide customers with four distinct restaurant offerings, from a power breakfast and the last remaining grand Sunday brunch in Peacock Alley to one of New York City's finest Steak Houses in Bull and Bear to Inagiku with its popular Japanese Cuisine to a more casual venue in Oscar's.

How important has the new Guerlain Spa offering been to the business?

The Guerlain Spa was just recognized by Spa Finder as the finest urban spa in the United States for 2009. Its size, with 16 exquisite treatment rooms, makes it particularly appealing to

incentive groups and private social gatherings, including weddings and anniversary parties.

The weak dollar will also continue to stimulate international travel into New York City and, in particular, international incentive travel – a market that is fast becoming a key growth market for us.

How strong is your meeting and event space offering for the property?

We have always been very strong in the group markets sector. For someone attending a meeting, it just doesn't feel like a large meetings hotel. The spaces are individual and unique, and the separation between meetings prevents the feeling of being in a large hotel. We are proud to be the only large luxury hotel setting in New York City – one with a wide range of unique spaces for meetings or social events that provides customers with a range of food and beverage offerings, as well as the intimacy of a boutique hotel experience in The Waldorf Towers. This unique combination of factors gives us a distinct edge when competing for small or large meetings.

What is the importance of technology on the guest experience?

Today's customer needs to be in contact with his office on a 24/7 basis and needs and expects an effective wireless backbone and access to technical support, regardless of the time of day, so we provide that.

What are the key priorities you're focused on for 2010 to continue the success for the property?

Our team has been challenged to remain focused on three key areas. First, our direct Sales and Marketing team must look beyond our traditional customer base and find out which other customers and markets are showing promise and get there first. Second, with training and development, we have never invested as heavily as we have today in making certain that we are fielding the very best talent at every level and in every position on the team. We do trimester evaluations with everyone and drive home to each individual just how important his role and his performance are to our collective success. Finally, the entire property must be in impeccable condition, regardless of time of day. Property condition has never been more important. It is a privilege for each of us to ensure the long-term health of a truly great landmark property and we take that responsibility very seriously. ●

Waldorf Astoria's Park Avenue Lobby