

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

Overlooking Central Park

An Interview with Suzie Mills,
General Manager, Trump International Hotel & Tower New York

EDITORS' NOTE Suzie Mills has served on the management team of the award-winning Trump International Hotel & Tower New York since its pre-opening in 1996, most recently being promoted to General Manager in 2006, giving her the distinction of being the youngest GM in New York City. Hospitality is second nature to Mills, having worked at her parents' hotel in Wales from the age of 10. Earlier this year, Mills was honored as one of Crain's New York's prestigious "40 Under 40" after earning her property the Forbes Travel Guide (formerly Mobil Travel Guide) Five Star Award, the industry's most coveted accolade, following her "Strive for Five" campaign.



Suzie Mills

PROPERTY BRIEF The iconic Trump International Hotel & Tower New York (www.trumpintl.com), the premiere property of the Trump Hotel Collection, is the only Forbes Five-Star Hotel with a Five-Star Restaurant (Jean-Georges) in New York. Soaring above Columbus Circle, just steps away from the Time Warner Center and Lincoln Center, the 52-story structure has 167 luxurious guest rooms and suites, complete with European-style kitchens, marble bathrooms, and spectacular views of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline.

Travel and tourism has seen a major impact from the economic crisis, especially in the luxury segment. For New York broadly, and specifically for Trump International, how severe has it been?

It has been quite severe. The collapse of Lehman Brothers started an immediate ripple effect throughout the city. We saw the cancellations, which we anticipated, but the demand to replace them was not coming in, dramatically impacting fourth quarter 2008. Because it's so influential, the downside of the media is that when they tell people they should not be traveling or spending money on luxury hotels, it makes it very challenging for us.

We sat down as a team to determine our best strategy to deal with the reality of what was going on. Not wanting to suddenly drop our rates, we knew we had to address them. Thankfully, with the strategies we



implemented, we were able to maintain our occupancy, which is important for us as a condominium-hotel. I have financial responsibility to each individual owner, as well as to Mr. Trump. I also have such an amazing team of associates and needed to ensure we could operate at the same staffing levels.

Is there a high level of consistency in your suite products or are they very diverse in design?

They are all consistent. We have 64 one-bedroom suites that overlook the city, and the style and the decor are the same throughout. We also offer one-bedroom suites that overlook Central Park, with larger floor-to-ceiling windows and two bathrooms. In addition, we have 30 two-bedroom Central Park view suites.

Are there any plans to change the suites or is the product where it should be today?

We'll be going through a major refurbishment starting in January 2010. We'll be doing half of the hotel from January through April, and will resume renovations on the remainder of the property from June through August. This will be a complete renovation with an updated design: all new fixtures, fittings, furniture, lighting, and an upgrade of technology.

In a market like New York, with so many great stand-alone restaurants, is it very challenging for a hotel to be profitable in that area, and are you happy with the product you're offering?

We're so fortunate to have Jean-Georges' namesake restaurant. Jean Georges is one of only five Michelin Three-Star restaurants in New York, and was named the Best Restaurant in the U.S. by James Beard. Jean-Georges himself is an icon, and would be able to succeed as a stand-alone without the hotel guests. For us, it's the most amazing selling aspect. He does all of our room service, and that follows through nicely in that we offer the service of in-room chefs who can cook in your suite so you can enjoy a personalized meal while overlooking Central Park. You walk into Jean-Georges for breakfast, lunch, or dinner and it's always full. He is offering a prix fixe menu, and it's possible his average check price has gone down, but it's still a tough reservation to get in New York. Jean-Georges has many restaurants around the world, but

this is the only one with his name on the door and where he chooses to spend his time.

In the luxury space today, do you need to offer a spa component, and can you highlight this property's focus on that part of the business?

A lot of people book hotels based on their spas today, whereas 12 years ago, it was all about the fitness center experience. We have a two-lane lap pool and 6,000 square feet of fitness space, and two treatment rooms that are reserved for hotel guests and residents only.

You have Donald Trump involved as an owner, but you also have 170 or so condo owners with their own personalities, so it would seem it could be hard to keep everybody happy. Is it challenging?

We're very lucky with our owners, and working with Mr. Trump is amazing. I have learned a great deal from him in the past 13 years. He truly has a wealth of knowledge, and his attention to detail is spectacular and admirable. The owners are happy and will hopefully continue to see results. Their profits are down slightly, but in this economy, they are thrilled to be seeing a profit at all. I receive phone calls thanking us for doing such a great job, which is so gratifying.

Did you think in the early days that you would still be here some 13 years later, and what has it been about the experience that has made it a place you've wanted to stay?

The time has flown by, but I am challenged every day and honestly enjoy my position so much. We had such a cohesive pre-opening team and 60 percent of our employees still remain from day one, which is practically unheard of. The entire Trump team wants the building to be successful.

When I was appointed General Manager in 2006, it was my mission to achieve the Forbes (then Mobil) Five Star rating again. Everybody was onboard, which made me so proud, and we all focused determinedly on the same goal. When we regained our Fifth Star in December 2008, I immediately called a staff meeting. In tears, the entire team was so proud to have accomplished the task. ●

Trump International Hotel & Tower New York(right); Lobby (left)