

A Feeling of Home

An Interview with Bernard Lackner,
General Manager, Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York

EDITORS' NOTE Bernard Lackner began his career at Hamburg's Four Seasons Hotel (*Vier Jahreszeiten*). Following appointments at the Hilton and the Hotel George V Paris, he emigrated to the United States and attended several management seminars at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. From there, he joined the management team of Four Seasons Hotels at The Pierre, New York. Soon thereafter, he became Resident Manager of the Maxim in Palm Springs, California, and eventually assumed the same post at the Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York. A year later, he was promoted to his present position.



Bernard Lackner

PROPERTY BRIEF Perfectly situated on Manhattan's elite Upper East Side, the Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York (www.Plaza-Athenee.com) is steps from some of the city's most revered attractions, including Central Park, Museum Mile, and Madison Avenue shopping. This 142-room luxury boutique hotel has been the home-away-from-home for sophisticated travelers from around the world for over two decades. The hotel recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation of guest rooms, suites, the lobby, and the fitness center, and created a new spa. Owned by the Imperial Hotels Group of Thailand, it is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World.

How is the Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York positioned in the market today?

It is clear that business has picked up substantially since summer of 2010 and we have strong occupancies, which have almost returned to the 2008 levels.

The rate is not there yet, but we are pleased with our RevPAR achievement.

What have you done to strengthen the suites product for the business traveler?

All the suites are renovated and feature larger bathroom facilities with efficiently placed fixtures and vanity space. There is also a sense of privacy within the suite by means of different doors that can be utilized for visitors. The suites offer state-of-the-art technology including wireless connectivity, iPod docking stations, and brand new 42-inch flat-screen televisions. Also provided, are spacious desks with ample lighting.

What type of feel have you created within those suites?

town house. With the addition of granite kitchenettes and modern appliances, we appeal to the long-term stay guest as well as family travelers.

In an area where space is of the essence, how has the spa business developed?

The spa has been very well received. We have four new treatment suites that each feature a sitting area and private bath inclusive of steam showers. The brand new fitness center, which faces the front of the hotel and features state-of-the-art equipment, has also been well received by our guests.

Are you happy with the food and beverage product today and do you foresee change on the horizon?

We are trying to upgrade the restaurant to give it a more contemporary, fresher, and younger look.

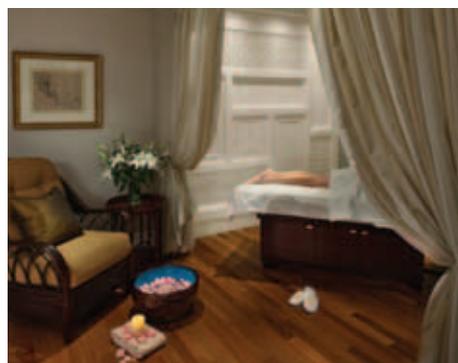
Many on the Upper East Side describe the area as "a city within a city." Is the competitive set primarily the Upper East Side or is it broader, including midtown and some of the other new products coming online?

Right now, our immediate competitive set is the Upper East Side, from 57th Street to 78th Street.

Is that a niche market only for the highest levels or is it broader than that?

Generally speaking, competition does certainly exist outside of this niche market as new hotels continue to open citywide. Interesting new concepts will capture the attention of the world traveler who is looking to explore and experiment with something different.

How much of an emphasis do you place on the high level, smaller meetings business, and what is the meeting space like at the property?



We have two meeting rooms: one is 1,000 square feet; the other is about 400 square feet. We are putting strong emphasis on meetings, although they were substantially affected by the downturn in 2009 and 2010. We are hoping for a recovery in 2011.

You're known as a leader in service and for having the highest service standards. At a property like yours, where you have so many employees who have been with you for so long and who know the guests, how critical is it to retain them in order to provide that consistent service?

Employee retention is of utmost importance, especially in this type of hotel, because it's relatively small and we are very concerned about making sure the guests are being recognized. We provide the feeling of a home, the warmth of being welcomed back, and a sense of family, as well as an exclusive "club" feeling with guests who enjoy coming back because they are recognized by the various employees at the hotel.

In leading this property, which has now gone through a multimillion-dollar renovation, how critical is it as a hotelier to have ownership that has a long-term vision for the property?

The long-term vision is extremely important because the landscape is ever-changing on all levels throughout the industry, and you want to make sure you have a long-range plan to ensure that you position the property correctly and are competitive with what is going on in the market over time.

Many say the role of a GM is much more focused on the financial and business side today. Has it become less about hospitality?

If you want to be successful, you have to find a happy medium. You can understand all the financials in the world, but if you don't have the guest contact, it is counterproductive.

Relationships are as important as they've ever been and, in this increasingly competitive market, it's more important than before to maintain personalized relationships with travel agencies, with the press, and with the individual guest. ●

Spa Treatment Room (center); Classic Suite (right)