

The Basics of Hospitality

An Interview with Geoffrey Gelardi,
Managing Director, The Lanesborough

EDITORS' NOTE A fourth-generation hotelier, Geoffrey Gelardi previously served as Managing Director of the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. He assumed his post at The Lanesborough in 1990.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Lanesborough occupies an 1827 landmark building that was restored to its original grandeur. A St. Regis hotel, the five-star ultra-deluxe property is situated on London's Hyde Park Corner and offers guests 52 rooms and 43 suites to choose from, decorated in Regency style and evoking the ambience of a 19th-century town house. The property is located in elegant Knightsbridge, minutes from the exclusive shopping of Harrods and Sloane Street. Guests will enjoy dining at Apsleys, a Heinz Beck Restaurant, which received a Michelin star in January 2010. The Lanesborough also offers award-winning afternoon tea, as well as drinks at the Library Bar, which offers an extensive array of vintage cognacs. The property also houses the most luxurious smoking venue in London. The hotel (www.lanesborough.com) boasts a Spa Studio, a Fitness Studio, a business center, concierge services, and six venues for meetings and social events.

With the impact of the economic downturn on hospitality, how has London fared, and where is the city today in regard to growth?

We've been very lucky in London. If you



Geoffrey Gelardi

look at the impact in most of the major cities in the world, London may have been the least affected, although we saw a significant downturn in 2008 and 2009.

As far as the growth is concerned, it's very sporadic. What we've seen is, when the markets are good and everybody is being positive, there is a strong return to very high occupancies and average rates. If there is a wavering or dip in the market, everybody becomes anxious and the activity stops.

It's definitely a recovery, but it goes in cycles. So it's uncertain.

During tough times, how do you balance the need for occupancy without losing rate integrity, and how pressured have rates been?

Rates have been pressured, but when you look at the overall rates in London in the luxury category, they have not gone down much in the past two years, if at all.

We've had periods of time where they've gone down as properties lowered their rates because occupancy was dramatically lower. But if you look at it for the past two years, we haven't seen a significant fall in average rates.

At The Lanesborough, we didn't have a year-on-year decline in average rates. It didn't go up much, but there was no decline. Although the occupancy did decline from year to year, we saw a significant increase in occupancy in 2010 compared to 2009. So people are still willing to pay the rates, but there are fewer people traveling.

The way we maintain our rates is the same way we've done it for many years – we've tried to give better value. We've continued our policy of including a lot of amenities within our rates. We are still the only hotel in London that offers a complimentary entertainment system with all music and movies included, as well as complimentary laptops in all rooms. And since we started giving complimentary Internet access, there are a number of hotels that have joined us.

But the concept of giving higher value for the price needs to be the focus now rather than chopping rates.



In terms of the butler service, which is an added-value service that you provide, is that an area that, through good or bad times, you're not willing to give up, and how do you balance controlling costs while making certain that guests aren't feeling the effects of any cuts?

That's not an easy thing to do, especially in this category of hotel.

There are small costs that can be controlled, but the significant overhead is still there in good times and bad. It depends on the philosophy of the hotel and of the owners who enable you to maintain those levels through the more difficult times. It's a bit shortsighted to slash services during a down period because, to the customer, you're only as good as your last stay and people will see through that very quickly.

Are you happy with where the product is today and do you foresee any major changes or renovations on the horizon?

I'm never happy. You can never get to the point where you can stand still on any of the issues, whether it be technology, maintenance,



The Lanesborough Exterior (top); Spa Studio Treatment Room (left); Buckingham Suite Bedroom (above)

what you're offering in the room, or within the food and beverage outlets or bars. The moment you think you're fine, that's when you start to lose.

So while we're constantly updating and looking at new ways of doing things, my latest project is building a new five-bedroom suite, for which it took me 15 years to get permission to build.

The Lanesborough was able to develop The Garden Room – the most luxurious smoking bar in London. It is comfortable both in winter and summer, and it has been very successful.

So we're constantly thinking of new things to do and are looking for new directions in terms of food concepts. We brought in Heinz Beck 18 months ago and he's been going from strength to strength in the restaurant, which has been very successful. We also received the fastest Michelin star in London in just five months.

You are known for having some of the best suites in the city. What was the thinking around the new suite you're developing?

We have a number of names for it but we're probably going to call it the Sovereign Suite.

We are using a new designer, Alberto Pinto, who is very well-known as a residential designer, but has only done a few hotels. The suite will be spectacular and will set new standards for suites in the industry. It will feature very interesting technology.

When you look at the impact you've had on the food and beverage side with Apsleys and other outlets, how have you found the right balance of hotel guests and local patrons, and have you been successful at getting the community to see it as a quality stand-alone experience?

It's the quality of the food and the service that makes that happen. We've always wanted to avoid having a pretentious restaurant, in addition to looking at trying to have a restaurant that offers very good food at reasonable prices and food that everybody will enjoy. That is what we created with Heinz Beck and the food at Apsleys.



Executive Junior Suite (above); Apsleys (top right); Afternoon Tea at Apsleys (center right)



It's one of the reasons we chose an Italian/Mediterranean type menu – it appeals to the vast majority of people. We also tried not to get too prissy with the menu. Heinz's philosophy on cooking is very healthy – he does not use cream or butter.

So we have a number of ways in which we appeal to both the locals and the visitors, and if the numbers are anything to go by, it's been successful.

How do you define the key traits today that are required to be a successful hotelier and has it changed or evolved over time?

It has changed and evolved over the years, but the basics remain the same. If you concentrate on the basics of hospitality, which involve understanding what your guests really want and delivering it, that has not changed.

How you go about it has changed. That is what you have to concentrate on – the ability to take the information you have and use the technology available to you to inform employees about what the guest expects.

More traditional hotel-keeping involves having to go and learn about your guests; with today's technology, employees can know a lot more about guests than in the past.

When you look back at opening this property and how you're still leading it, what about the experience has made it a place you've wanted to stay?



I enjoy what I do here, which is the most important thing. I'm given the ability, by both our management company and our owners, to do what I think is right and to develop the hotel in a way that will keep us on the leading edge.

It's important that you're given enough autonomy to give the hotel an individual feeling and a level of service that makes it difficult for other hotels to maintain, especially during the down time.

It's the mentality of the management company and the owners that keep me here because we're able to continually maintain and improve the facility.

Do you ever think about slowing down?

I hope not. Why would I slow down? There is always so much to do. I probably have slowed down – I just don't have time to think about it. ●