

Hospitality's Global Impact

The Soul and Spirit of the Property

An Interview with Peter Shaindlin,
Chief Operating Officer, Halekulani Corporation



EDITORS' NOTE Before joining Halekulani Corporation, Peter Shaindlin was Founding Principal of Lotus Luxury Group; Vice President, Caribbean for Rosewood Hotels & Resorts; and previously managed properties including Rosewood's Little Dix Bay, the Boca Raton Resort & Club, and the Stanhope Hotel and Grand Bay Hotel in New York City, as well as Assistant General Manager of Food & Beverage, United Nations World Headquarters in New York.



Peter Shaindlin

COMPANY BRIEF Halekulani Corporation (www.halekulanicorporation.com), founded in 1980 and headquartered in the heart of Waikiki, is comprised of two primary assets in the heart of Waikiki, which together make up Hotels & Resorts of Halekulani. Both hotels are internationally recognized luxury hospitality establishments. Halekulani Corporation completely redeveloped the legendary Halekulani in the early 1980s and manages both hotels. The company has been long recognized as one of the city and state's leading supporters of local arts and cultural institutions and initiatives. Halekulani Corporation is a wholly owned subsidiary of Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd.

Did you see a major impact on Halekulani as a result of the economic crisis, and as an industry leader, was it less of an impact than some others might have felt?

While we have felt a market impact, compared to some of our comp set, it has been somewhat less severe.

The main reasons for that are twofold: first, we have a very high percentage of repeat guests at this hotel. The value of the hotel increased for them from an emotional perspective during this time of protracted duress in that we became, more than ever before, a place of retreat and rejuvenation in the midst of the global economic crisis.

The second reason is that from a strategic business standpoint, I chose not to jump into a price war with the competition. We started to focus more than ever on service, which is the basis of our reputation to begin with. From a business standpoint, we identified the fact that service is the least expensive, and the most important, commodity to improve upon to remain competitive in an economic crisis.

How do you take it to another level when you're already a consistent service leader?

In the luxury hospitality market, the tendency has become for most hotels to focus on 'stuff,' while we focus on staff.

Most hotels focus 80 percent on technical training and 20 percent on philosophical training; we do the reverse. When I say philosophical training, I refer to moving from the technical "what" to the philosophical "why," the idea being to not under-

estimate the intelligence of an individual employee, but to share with him the reason why we would like him to perform that service well rather than just simply how he should perform it.

Are you happy with where the product is today and do you foresee major changes coming?

I love the product where it is, but I'm never satisfied, which encourages me to innovate. What we need to be careful of in the luxury sector is the perception that there has been a brilliant but insidious Trojan Horse-style entrance into the city led by technology.

The tech industry would like us to believe that we need every new product they come out with. I always remind myself that service was arguably better 100 years ago: more elegant, refined, and personalized.

So we need to use technology smartly, because about 80 to 90 percent of that technology is back of the house oriented, for information gathering and marketing; it does not often touch the guest in a way that directly pleases him during his visit.

What worked for Halekulani so well in its first 25 years is that we are not simply high-tech. We are state of the art, but we see ourselves as high-touch.

Is it important that your suites have an individual feel or do you maintain some consistency within the product?

Our approach to our largest suites is holistic overall but also individualized, as each one has a different personality.

At Halekulani, the premier suites include the Vera Wang Suite, the Orchid Suite, and the Royal Suite, which evokes the character of indigenous Hawaiian culture; the Orchid Suite is about the elements – the earth, sea, and sky;

and the Vera Wang Suite is about a contemporary lifestyle – romance moderne.

Part of this was inspired by the competition, because before we renovated these suites in recent years we visited other hotels and observed a conceptual homogeneity among their largest suites; rather generic approaches prevailed.

There is nothing at Halekulani that is cookie-cutter so that keeps the standard going.

When this opportunity presented itself, did you know it was the right fit and has it been what you expected?

Prior to Halekulani, I had been enjoying and building a career that focused principally on the management and rebirthing of iconic hotels.

One of the things I have learned is that you shouldn't try to manage an icon; you should shepherd it. The mission is to identify the key soul and spirit of the property that is unique and allow it to radiate, but also to invoke a sense of relevance to the contemporary traveler.

I had not ever had the opportunity to see Halekulani – I walked in and its energy and spirit consumed me. It stands for something timeless and precious to so many people, so one has a responsibility to polish it like a diamond and properly present it with discretion, taste, and elegance.

Why isn't there a better understanding of the value and necessity of the travel and tourism industry? Is it too segmented to have a unified voice?

I don't think the industry has done enough to convey the profound significance of its impact on society. We need to remind governments of the extraordinary role our hotels can play in the prosperity of the communities in which they function. For example, Halekulani Corporation is arguably the largest overall corporate supporter of the arts in Hawaii.

When tourism is strong, that filters back into the income of the hospitality employees and goes to benefit their children as well, who are the future of our culture and country. The multibillion-dollar impact of that on a national level is so extraordinary that it's not just about hotels – that is only where it begins. Where it truly climaxes is in the quality of life of the overall society. ●

Halekulani Premier Suites