

Hospitality's Global Impact

A Destination

An Interview with Randy Morton,
President and Chief Operating Officer, Bellagio



EDITORS' NOTE Randy Morton has held his current posts since October 2007. Morton joined MGM MIRAGE (since renamed MGM Resorts International) in 2000 as Vice President of its Hotel Operations for Bellagio, where he led the property to receive the prestigious AAA Five Diamond Award, which it has now held for more than 10 years. He recently served as President of Monte Carlo Resort and Casino. Morton began his career as a management trainee with Four Seasons. He is a graduate of George Brown College in Toronto, Canada.



Randy Morton

PROPERTY BRIEF Opened in October of 1998, Las Vegas' AAA Five Diamond Bellagio (www.bellagio.com) offers 3,933 guest rooms, including 512 suites, and provides visitors with more than 100,000 square feet of gaming area; five outdoor pools, four whirlpools, and 51 private cabanas; two wedding chapels; and more than 200,000 square feet of meeting and convention facilities. Highlights include the 1,809-seat "O" Theatre; more than 1,200 dancing fountains and over 13,500 square feet of conservatory and botanical gardens; 42,000 square feet of boutiques; a variety of dining options including two AAA Five Diamond restaurants; a gallery of fine art; several nightclubs, lounges, and bars; the 55,000-square-foot Spa Bellagio; a 6,000-square-foot fitness center; and Shadow Creek, one of the nation's most exclusive and top-rated golf courses.

One of the world's leading global hospitality companies, MGM Resorts International operates a portfolio of destination resort brands, including Bellagio, MGM Grand, Mandalay Bay, and The Mirage, and has significant holdings in gaming, hospitality, and entertainment. The company owns and operates 15 properties located in Nevada, Mississippi, and Michigan, and has 50 percent investments in four other properties in Nevada, Illinois, and Macau.

Travel and hospitality in general has been affected by the downturn. Can you talk about how deep the impact was and Bellagio's positioning in the market?

Fortunately, we have a loyal clientele. But when the recession hit, like everyone else in Las Vegas, we started discounting our rates and doing promotions to encourage our

loyal following to come to Vegas and Bellagio. So our rates are down significantly over the past two to three years, but our occupancy is starting to stabilize because our convention business is coming back.

We were very encouraged by what happened during the second half of 2010 in terms of convention booking base and we'll see the results at Bellagio and MGM Resorts in 2011. The first quarter of 2011, were up in convention bookings approximately 20 percent over 2010.

It's a strong booking pace and encouraging for our business. We've always had success in the convention market in Las Vegas and definitely in MGM Resorts, and we're focused on attracting new conventions.

In the Las Vegas market, where you have a number of properties going after a similar client, how challenging is it to differentiate and how do you show what makes a specific property unique?

At Bellagio we're unique because of the amenities we offer. We have had the AAA Five Diamond rating for 10 years and that is a great marketing tool for us. But it's also a game changer for Bellagio as a destination.

We are the only resort in North America that has two Five Diamond restaurants; we have the most spectacular show, "O" from Cirque du Soleil sitting in the middle of the casino; we have the fountain show, viewed by approximately 15,000 people a day; and we have a flower conservatory that changes five times a year and hosts more than 10,000 people a day.

So we're fortunate to not only have a great location and the best brand in the industry, but to also have the traffic to support all the restaurants, the casino, and the different venues of Bellagio.

How have your partnerships with the restaurants been beneficial, especially in a market like Las Vegas that has so many offerings?

Fortunately, the restaurant partners have been successful since day one. We have the most spectacular steakhouse in town, Prime, and we've been fortunate to be partners with Jean George for 12 years. The first restaurant deal that was signed at Bellagio was with Sirio Maccioni, who brought in Circo and Le Cirque. Le Cirque has now been a Five Diamond restaurant for the past eight years and Circo is one of the top Italian restaurants in Las Vegas.

Todd English has done a phenomenal job with our restaurant Olives, which serves lunch and dinner in Via Bellagio, and Michael Mina has Michael Mina at Bellagio, which is based in the flower conservatory.

How critical is it to offer a true spa experience?

We're fortunate to have a 55,000-square-foot spa. When we opened Bellagio, the spa and salon was about half the size and it was full and sold out every day.

When we built the Spa Tower in December of 2004, we had the opportunity to add additional massage rooms and double the size of the gym, and we created our signature Watsu massage.

So we're fortunate now to service and cater to the demand; we have all the amenities of a world-class spa for our guests.

How has your employee training program, Beyond Excellence, been a differentiator for Bellagio?

Customer service is our number one initiative at Bellagio and our number one priority at MGM Resorts. We have the best people training our employees. Today, we are doing Train the Trainers for our new loyalty program called M life that we're launching as a company in Las Vegas in January 2011.

So training of and communication with our employees is important. Since we have 8,200 employees and we serve 4,500 meals a day in our employee dining room, we have an opportunity to regularly communicate with the employees.

Every day, through pre-shift, we do a communication piece called, "B Informed" on what's happening today, and through our 5 Step Beyond Excellence program, employees have the opportunity to communicate to me and the executive team. We respond back to them in real time. The most important thing I do is to be available, to be of service, and to be accountable to the employees.

Are hoteliers today focused more on business and less on hospitality?

Some hoteliers are, but I learned the business through my uncle who was a hotelier and spent 90 percent of his time in the lobby. Izzy Sharp, still one of my mentors, is a great businessman but he is the ultimate hotelier.

Even at a property with 3,933 rooms, I tell our staff at the front desk, we still check in every guest one at a time and we still clean our rooms one at a time. ●

Picasso Dining Room (center); Bellagio Exterior (right)