



A Prime Location

An Interview with Simon Scarborough,
Group Operations Director and
General Manager, Flemings Hotel, Mayfair



EDITORS' NOTE Simon Scarborough has held his current post since January 2002. Before joining Flemings, Scarborough worked for Thistle Hotels, most recently as Resident Manager at the Thistle Tower Hotel, London. He was also General Manager of the Thistle Kensington Gardens Hotel, London, and the Thistle Ship Hotel, Surrey. Scarborough has also held positions within Forte Hotels in Dublin and the Thistle Brands Hatch and Thistle St Albans Hotel. He gained a BTEC National Diploma in Hotel Management from Norwich Hotel School in 1985.



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PROPERTY BRIEF Flemings Hotel in Mayfair was founded by Robert Fleming in 1851, a date commemorated by the hotel's stained glass window depicting the Great Exhibition at Alexandra Palace. Today, Flemings Hotel (www.flemings.co.uk) in central London occupies six interconnecting Georgian town houses bordering Half Moon Street and Clarges Street, and is privately owned.

How much of an impact did the hospitality industry face in London, and for Flemings, have you seen the business coming back?

It has been coming back. Flemings is fortunate being in Central London because it is such a prime location that people want to come to for both leisure and business.

We had a fantastic 2010. It was as strong as it has been in the first half of the decade, which was particularly strong.

Twenty-four months ago, we decided to change the markets we looked at, because we had a lot of clients that weren't traveling as much. So we sent the sales team to Central Europe, to areas like Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden, to look at corporate clients coming from there. We have become less dependent on two or three markets.

So our success is a combination of being in Mayfair, our multi-million pound refurbishment, and the repositioning of Flemings in terms of looking at places where the business is coming from and targeting it.

How critical to your role is having ownership with a common vision for the property?

It is absolutely critical. Very few would have had the vision in 2009 to spend \$4 million

on a new restaurant, bar, and event space. But when I presented to the owners that if we could do that in 2009, when things turned the corner in 2010, then we'd be way up there, they agreed and it has definitely paid off.

It's an advantage that's second to none to have that support from your owners. It means that Flemings will keep getting stronger.

How do you put the highest service standards in place to ensure a consistent client experience?

It's all about hospitality. Some people think hospitality is service, but it's not. I could serve you a lovely cup of coffee and it could be pleasant, but it's not being hospitable.

All the frontline training is done by me, because it's important they get the vision where we're coming from. Hospitality is about treating people the way you want to be treated. So in our training, we put the staff in the position of our guests.

When you have 119 bedrooms and 10 suites, even if the guest's room is not ready, one of those rooms is going to be clean, so you can offer a warm smile, take him to his room, let him shower and change, and have complimentary breakfast and coffee so he can go to their meeting or rest, and when he comes back that evening, all his baggage has been put into his new room and it's seamless.

That is the difference between good service and hospitality. I try to get the message across to our team that for people coming to stay at Flemings, it's like coming home.

How do you implement the technology today but not lose the hospitality you just touched on?

It all stems from the top and your senior exec team, as well as about having the best PMS system to keep guest records and make sure the computer reminds you what your individual guests prefer.

But what makes a hospitable place is if you remember the information. So use the technology to assist you, but it shouldn't feel like you need a computer to remember what a guest likes. I remember what my guests like, because I have a personal interest.

I like having only 129 rooms, including our 10 suites, because you have that personal interaction with your guests.

Is it challenging to compete today as an independent since you don't have the marketing reach of a larger brand?

Yes, but it depends on how you approach it. I have good support from the owners and we have a representative permanently based in the States who visits the most important cities regularly.

I go to the States four or five times a year myself. We have a fairly large sales force, and spent a lot in 2010 on our branding and marketing; we do beautiful e-mail blasts catering to different market segments.

Traditionally, in tough times, bigger brands are stronger because people know what they're getting. As an independent, we just have to work harder to make sure we get out there. We have to be proactive and remind people that we're here but, in the end, it always gets back to how we take care of the clients when they come in.

Has the general manager role evolved to where it has lost some of the hospitality aspect?

Yes, because the big chains in particular are run by people who look at the bottom line – they are accountants running beautiful properties. They have also taken the role of general manager away and may have a regional general manager who is in charge of five properties and a junior person in charge of the day-to-day running of the operation.

That has had a negative effect because the general manager should be the host.

I don't see every client, but I make every effort and my Guest Services team certainly see everyone. I personally greet all my top clients and I stand in the front hall at least once a day for 20 minutes. I have a property and owners that like my style of being there and seeing clients and guests.

Fundamentally as an industry, we are run by accountants now. It's all about return on investment.

What do you enjoy most about your role and what frustrates you?

What I enjoy is the old-fashioned hospitality. There is nothing that gives me greater pleasure than when the team and I surpass expectations, and the guests rave about how we handled things.

The thing that frustrates me is that, in a way, we've created a monster because, with technology, everyone's job has become 24/7 and everybody wants you to respond straightaway. ●

Martinis being poured at the launch of the bar (left); Pink Afternoon Tea (center); Afternoon Tea in the Front Room (right)