

Hospitality

Suite Strength



A view of Central Park from the living room of a spacious suite (above); Jean-Georges Restaurant (upper right); the natural salt pool (right)

**An Interview with Suzie Mills,
General Manager, Trump International Hotel & Tower New York**

EDITORS' NOTE Suzie Mills has served on the management team of the award-winning Trump International Hotel & Tower New York since pre-opening in 1996. Mills was promoted to General Manager in 2006, becoming the youngest GM in New York City. Beginning her hospitality career working at her parents' hotel in Wales at the age of 10, she has been honored as one of Crain's New York's prestigious "40 Under 40" and earned her property the AAA Five Diamond Award and the Forbes Travel Guide Five Star Award.



Suzie Mills

PROPERTY BRIEF The premiere property of the Trump Hotel Collection, the iconic Trump International Hotel & Tower New York (www.trumphotelcollection.com/central-park) is the only Forbes Five Star and AAA Five Diamond Hotel with a Five-Star, Five-Diamond (and also Michelin Three-Star and New York Times Four-Star) Restaurant, Jean-Georges. Steps from the Time Warner Center and Lincoln Center, the 52-story structure has 176 luxurious guest rooms and suites, complete with European-style kitchens, marble bathrooms, and exceptional views of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline.

Is the New York market coming back strong? How is business for Trump?

I definitely see the market coming back. Fortunately, we had a very strong summer. With the hotel's location on Central Park, and with a majority of suite inventory, we do very well with families coming in over the summer, and we've seen that grow year over year. People definitely have money and are willing to spend it, but they want to see that they're getting value for their money in these post-recession times.

Is it difficult for customers to understand that higher rates most often offer more value?

If a customer is comparing us to our competitive set of hotels such as the Mandarin, Four Seasons, Peninsula and Ritz-Carlton, then they see the value for their money, especially since we're largely an all-suite property. At Trump, you're going to get a suite for the price at which you might get a standard room at another property. That's a large part of how we show our value for the money.

How successful have you been at maintaining rate integrity while driving occupancy?

It's important to maintain rate integrity as much as possible and to constantly monitor your competitors to see where they're pricing themselves so you don't have a huge disparity.

There are different ways of marketing and so many different channels out there – especially third-party channels – where you can attract a larger crowd but without discounting your rate.

Within the luxury segment, how critical is it to have a true spa offering? What was your vision in creating the spa?

When people are booking hotels today, they often look first at what type of spa the property offers.

After our \$30-million rooms renovation, the spa was the last piece of the puzzle to help us maintain the Five-Star level.

We did an \$8-million renovation of the spa, led by Ivanka Trump. We wanted to put in softer elements with different lighting and textures using beautiful Italian marbles and walnut woods, making it a warmer spa experience. We have a beautiful manicure/pedicure room with hand-embroidered silk wallpaper.

We also changed the pool to natural salt, which is not only greener for the environment than typical chemical chlorine but also yields 50 percent clearer water, and guests don't get red eyes or have to endure the strong smell and residue of standard chlorine.

What has made the food and beverage component work so well for you?

After 15 years, still having a restaurant that offers full breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day is a unique statement to be able to make.

This is Jean-Georges' signature restaurant; it's his only Michelin Three-Star restaurant and he is here every day, which makes a difference. For the clientele to see Jean Georges on the line cooking is a huge statement, and people come here because they know they're always going to have that consistency of food and level of service. We have a beautiful formal dining room but there is still a great energy there. In addition, Nougatine restaurant turns the tables over three times in the evening, which is great.

We also have an outside dining area where we added some great sofas so you can have cocktails as well as dinner, and it brings all the elements together. It's a hidden gem.

How do you provide technology as an added value for guests without overwhelming them?

There are elements of technology that are critical for the efficiency of the guest experience, such as centralized lighting. You also have to make sure you don't overcomplicate the room.

You want it to be efficient but easy to use so you know how to turn on the TV or close the drapes. In addition, guests these days are generally conducting business while they're traveling so you have to make sure they can work from the room.

What is the value in being part of the Trump Hotel Collection? Is there coordination among properties in terms of how you market?

We were a stand-alone property for 10 years but are now able to say we're the flagship that inspired a collection of eight hotels, and that number is growing. That makes the cross-selling easier because we have more people going out there selling us as a brand rather than just an individual property. People are familiar with the Trump brand – they know the level of quality and standard of service they can expect at all of the properties. We have a few signature services that we offer throughout, such as our attaché guest services department and an extensive guest history program so when you stay in one hotel, your preferences follow you to every Trump property in the portfolio.

As the brand is growing, it makes our jobs easier because there is so much recognition of the luxury hotel division of the Trump Organization.

Is it important to be more focused on the asset management side and less on hospitality?

We are all here to make the guests happy but we have to look at it from a financial perspective as well. We're not just general managers but revenue managers, sales and marketing managers, and operations managers.

How critical is it to have owners engaged in the property?

That is the nice part about being a family brand – actually, the only family-run luxury hotel brand in the world today. Mr. Trump and his three grown children – Don Jr., Ivanka, and Eric – are very involved with every aspect and decision, and they're open to hearing new ideas. We're in their backyard, just a few blocks from Trump Tower. If something is not working, you can discuss it and change it, whereas it can get more challenging when you're in a bigger corporation in that you don't get to that person at the top.

To have the hands-on approach is critical to making it successful and to being able to react to what is going on in the industry. ●