



Unlocking the Destination

An Interview with Brian Povinelli, Global Brand Leader, and George Fleck, Vice President-Global Brand Management, Westin Hotels & Resorts and Le Méridien



EDITORS' NOTE Brian Povinelli joined Starwood in 2006 to lead global brand marketing for Sheraton. Recently, he was a member of the company's North America brand management team where he was responsible for marketing, advertising, brand management, and strategic positioning for Starwood's two largest brands, Sheraton and Westin. Prior to joining Starwood Hotels & Resorts, Povinelli was the Vice President of Global Integrated Marketing at Reebok. He began his career at W.B. Doner & Company Advertising where he spent eight years between their Cleveland and London offices. Povinelli is a graduate of James Madison University.

German-born George Fleck's extensive work experience spans Starwood's Asia-Pacific, North America, and EAME divisions, which includes Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Fleck joined Starwood in 2002 as the Business Travel Sales Manager of W Chicago Lakeshore and has since held various leadership roles in Sales & Marketing at some of the W brand's most iconic properties. Prior to joining the global brand management team for W Hotels Worldwide and Le Méridien, Fleck held the position of Director of Marketing at W Barcelona. Before joining Starwood, Fleck worked for Hyatt Corporation and Marriott International in various sales and operational positions in the U.S. and Europe.

COMPANY BRIEF Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. (www.starwoodhotels.com) is one of the leading hotel and leisure companies in the world with 1,134 properties in nearly 100 countries and 171,000 employees at its owned and managed properties. Starwood is a fully integrated owner, operator, and franchisor of hotels, resorts, and residences with the following internationally renowned brands: St. Regis®, The Luxury Collection®, W®, Westin®, Le Méridien®, Sheraton®, Four Points® by Sheraton, Aloft®, and ElementSM. Starwood also owns Starwood Vacation Ownership, Inc.

What is your vision for the Le Méridien brand?

Povinelli: Starwood acquired the brand in November 2005 and we saw it as a great complement to our current portfolio of brands. Because of the brand's existing international presence, there was not a lot of overlap with our other upscale brands, Westin and Sheraton. So we wanted to round out our position in the upper-upscale space.

There was not, however, a strong brand identity and Starwood is about creating distinct lifestyle brands. So we went through a process of calibrating the properties and exited about 40 hotels that did not meet our vision or standards for the brand.



Brian Povinelli



George Fleck

Since then, we have focused on creating a unified brand positioning and platform that meets and exceeds our guests' needs.

Le Méridien is a brand that, through guest experience and positioning, will help our guests unlock the destination to which they're traveling.

How challenging was it to change the culture and put that common thread in?

Povinelli: One of the biggest hurdles was that the physical product was in a very different state when we acquired the brand. In some cases, we could not change the footprint without tearing down and rebuilding, so we focused on bringing a service culture to the organization that was palatable not only for the associates but for the guests as well.

We started in the guest rooms with the signature sleep experience – we designed around the bed. Our goal was to provide a consistent experience, be it through the bath amenities or the fitness outlet.

We also need a compelling proposition and we have developed something unique through our programming. The reality is that a lot of travelers, especially those on business, don't get an opportunity to explore the location they're visiting. So we started with a desire to unlock a destination in a way that is both accessible and exciting.

Fleck: Research shows that the first 10 minutes of arrival matter the most, so we looked at the arrival experience and determined how we could create a similar ambience at all of our properties.

We first reimagined the look and feel of our lobby, which we call the Hub, and incorporated high impact artwork that sets the theme. The artwork is commissioned through our creative community called the LM100.

We also offer a signature scent, called LM01, created by French scent maker Le Labo, which is the same in all hotels.

There is also a partnership that every hotel offers through a program called Unlock Art with local cultural centers, and each guest receives complementary access to this cultural center – via the key card that each guest receives upon check in. The key card itself is also a piece of curated design or art that underscores Le Méridien's connection with local artists and cultural centers.

Which properties are you bringing to the market and where do you see the greatest opportunity?

Povinelli: Growth is one of our key focuses. Over the next 12 months, Le Méridien will open more hotels than we have in any previous year since Starwood acquired the brand. We're seeing great response not only from a guest perspective but also from the development and ownership community.

We're seeing strong growth not only in Asia-Pacific but in North America, where we have just about doubled our portfolio in a 24-month period.

The portfolio now includes just over 100 hotels and we are at a point where we have great penetration in major cities and hubs around the world. We remain very focused on those first-tier and second-tier cities.

This brand has the opportunity to go to 200 hotels-plus in the coming years and we are on track to achieve that goal.

What is your food and beverage focus?

Povinelli: It becomes a bit challenging at our scale to have a branded concept throughout every property when it comes to a full restaurant.

Instead, we have a deep partnership with the coffee company illy that helps us bring to light a coffee culture atmosphere, and we're strategic with both existing and new hotels on how we create the dynamic in that public space. We ensure that the food and beverage outlet is adjacent to the lounge areas at each property, and we call that the Latitude Bar, which is a signature concept at the vast majority of our hotels.

We also have a signature breakfast program with Jean-Georges in every Le Méridien property around the world.

Overall, Starwood is creating its own branded F&B concepts but more so by cuisine types, and we're trying to create a short list to offer at any of our properties, provided it makes sense.

Why have you stayed with Starwood?

Povinelli: The culture allows you to try new things and encourages innovation, but always putting the guest first. We're about helping people experience the world in a better way. ●

Le Méridien Cairo Airport (left): Le Méridien Philadelphia (right)