



Creating a Loyal Guest

An Interview with Geoffrey Gelardi,
Managing Director, The Lanesborough



Living area of The Lanesborough Suite (left); The Garden Room (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Geoffrey Gelardi, a fourth-generation hotelier, previously served as Managing Director of Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. In 1990, he assumed his post at The Lanesborough.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Lanesborough occupies an 1827 landmark building that was restored to its original grandeur. A St. Regis hotel, the five-star ultra-luxury property is situated on London's Hyde Park Corner and offers guests 93 guest rooms including 43 suites to choose from, decorated in Regency style and evoking the ambience of a 19th-century townhouse. The property is located in elegant Knightsbridge, minutes from the exclusive shopping of Harrods and Sloane Street. Guests will enjoy dining at Apsleys, a Heinz Beck Restaurant, which received a Michelin star in January 2010. The Lanesborough also offers award-winning Afternoon Tea, cocktails at the Library Bar, and an extensive array of vintage cognacs. The property houses the most luxurious smoking venue in London, The Garden Room. The hotel (www.lanesborough.com) boasts a Spa Studio, a Fitness Studio, a business center, and six venues for meetings and social events.



Geoffrey Gelardi

What is the secret to the success of The Lanesborough?

It's about moving with the times as quickly as possible and maintaining the fabric and identity of the hotel, as well as being consistent. That's how you build relationships with loyal guests, and most importantly, it is having the right employees in the right place to look after our loyal guests.

Is it challenging to offer the technology that guests desire while making it easy to use?

We are testing new things all the time. We recently tested a notebook to replace the in-room laptops. However, the one we tested did not have quick enough processors so it did not fulfill its purpose and we reverted back to laptops.

We are in the midst of testing a new locking system that uses car door technology. With the key in your pocket, as you approach the

door, it will automatically click open. Part of the secret to making technology work is not using brand new technology but rather using proven technology in a new way. That's what we are doing in this instance.

How critical has the suite product been and how have you invested in it?

The room/suite mix is critical at different times of the year. We recently had what we call "The Season" in London, which starts with the Chelsea Flower Show, and then Ascot followed

by Wimbledon, so the demand for suites was exceptional.

After that, we enter a slower period where we have business professionals coming in who want a regular room or maybe a junior suite for one or two nights. They do not tend to spend a lot of time in their rooms and therefore do not need suites.

We renovated one of our large suites last year, The Lanesborough Suite, and it was occupied at just over 60 percent for the year at full rate, which is unusual for a suite of that price. It was new on the market and we had some excellent publicity on it. It was designed by Alberto Pinto, whose work is mainly residential; he has a following that was interested in the suite. It is a magnificent space with four bedrooms, five-and-a-half bathrooms, two living rooms, and a terrace. There is now a demand for large suites, which is why more hotels are creating them.

How much can the market sustain in terms of new properties coming onboard?

London, New York, and Paris are among a few major cities that are lucky to sustain very high occupancies and average rates. Every time a new hotel opens, the market gets slightly diluted, and there has been a plethora of new hotels recently in London.

It helps us stay sharp since every time a new product comes onto the market, we can learn something from that and strive to be better.

London has a way to go before we are at the point where there is no longer room for competition. But with the amount of new rooms that have come online over the past few years, demand has dropped a bit.

How critical is it to provide a seamless experience for guests in terms of maintaining the staff?

Maintaining consistency in our front line staff is crucial in continuing to give recognition to our regular guests. These are the people who recognize our guests on a personal level and provide that genuine warm welcome and anticipate a guest's needs before they have to ask. A number of our employees have been here since the hotel first opened its doors in 1991.

How have you been successful with the food and beverage component?

Food and beverage is a constant challenge, which is why most hotels look for help from outside the hotel industry, especially with their restaurants. We are in the fortunate position to have the 3 Michelin-starred chef Heinz Beck run our restaurant kitchen. He develops our menus and assists with employee training. Many hotels can operate restaurants but there are few who can operate a Michelin-Star restaurant without outside help.

The Garden Room is a concept that was created when the smoking ban in London came into effect. We were going to lose a large part of our revenue from the Library Bar, where we used to offer a fine selection of cigars and cognac. The idea came about to build a specially designed outside smoking area on a terrace that was not used in the first 15 years of operation and it has proven tremendously successful.

Do you ever take time to appreciate the success of this property?

The competition is always improving and we have to work hard and continue to earn accolades. One of the best awards we have received was the recent Forbes Five-Star rating, of which there are only 6 hotels in London and 82 in the world.

How far out do you look in terms of refurbishment?

We are now in the midst of two major projects, one of which is adding a 20,000-square-foot spa. It will be a private members club that will also be a fantastic facility for guests of the hotel.

We're always looking at opportunities to make sure The Lanesborough remains at the forefront. ●