

# Hospitality

## Providing What the Customer Wants

An Interview with Janis Milham,  
Senior Vice President, Modern Essentials and Extended Stay, Marriott International



Courtyard Refreshing Business bistro

**EDITORS' NOTE** Janis Milham started her Marriott career in 1988 and has worked in various brands and positions. Recently, she served as Area General Manager in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she oversaw 11 Marriott hotels, and then Vice President and Global Brand Manager for Courtyard by Marriott. Prior to joining Marriott, she worked for a Marriott Franchise Partner and for Procter & Gamble. She is a graduate of the University of Kansas with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism.



Janis Milham

**COMPANY BRIEF** Courtyard by Marriott ([www.marriott.com/courtyard](http://www.marriott.com/courtyard)) is a Marriott International select-service brand. Courtyard is designed for business travelers but also accommodates families. Its rooms feature flexible space that allows guests to both work and relax. The majority of locations have the Bistro, which serves breakfast and dinner, and a 24-hour "mini-mart" for grab and go items. Marriott International, Inc. ([www.marriott.com](http://www.marriott.com)) is a leading lodging company with more than 3,800 lodging properties in 72 countries and territories.

### What is the history and heritage of the Courtyard brand?

We opened our first property in 1983 in Atlanta, Georgia and were the first brand extension that Marriott produced.

Thirty years ago, there were two types of hotels: full-service hotels in major markets and roadside hotels. Courtyard created the select-service product for business travelers.

We identified an entirely new lodging segment: the business travelers who didn't have options in the suburbs and business parks. So it created this upper moderate tier.

### How has the brand evolved over time?

We've always based any changes we make on what the customer wants.

Our room decor and designs have evolved; our food and beverage platforms have evolved; and our technology platforms have evolved – even in how we enable technology in our hotels. When guests checked in with us 30 years ago, they went to their rooms and were tethered to their desks. Now, people are looking for a different experience – they want to drop their stuff in a room, come back out with their computer, and be around people in the lobby.

### What is the profile of your clientele?

Business travelers are about 80 percent of our business.

However, over time, we have seen business travelers combining business trips with leisure trips, so leisure room nights have increased more than business room nights.

### How much growth potential is there for the brand?

We're going to be at 1,000 hotels probably in 2015 and over the next 15 years, we'll probably be at about 2,000 hotels.

We have the largest pipeline of any of the brands in Marriott; we still have a lot of growth potential in the U.S. and we have significant growth potential outside of the U.S. – we only have about 100 properties outside of the U.S. in 38 countries.

We're now growing more in urban areas – in New York, we opened three over the past year; L.A. Live is another example of properties we're opening.

So we're starting to see opportunities in downtown urban markets as well as tertiary secondary markets.

### How do you maintain a Courtyard feel while catering to the local market for each property?

One of the things that you will see in our Courtyards across the globe is our billboard, which is our virtual concierge: information easily accessible to travelers – everything from arrivals and departure times for airlines to restaurant suggestions to news headlines to stock market updates.

Our lobbies are definitely places you want to be. They are comfortable, inviting, and multi-purpose. We have a business section of the lobby. The decor and size will differ among properties, but they offer guests similar elements.

### How far does the technology go for your brand? How do you avoid losing the personal touch?

It's about giving our customers choices. Some customers prefer interacting with the associate when they check in, but we also have to give them alternatives. So we have highlighted our mobile check-in in our full-service brand, and that will be implemented in Courtyard this year.

What we learn from customers is they want us to help enable their technology. So it's about letting them check in on their phones or ordering room service, but not offering them something that will be obsolete in five minutes.

### How much of a focus is food and beverage? What makes a hotel successful in this arena?

For us, breakfast is king, so you need great options for your customers. We have done that quite well with our Bistro Concept. When we talk about options, some people want to grab-and-go and others want to linger over breakfast, so it's highly important to offer those options. You also need a good variety with healthy items.

In our tier at least, having a bar and having light food options is critical, but having a sit-down dinner is not something a lot of people want to do in our hotels today.

We do see that people are taking something back to the room, but it's more of a casual menu that offers great options.

### What do you look for in the hiring process to help determine if an employee will be successful?

It's about hiring people who love this crazy business, who love people, who love to serve, and who have great energy. If I have to choose that over education, I always will.

### Did you ever imagine you would remain at Marriott for your entire career?

Marriott has a core belief that if you take care of your associates, they will take care of your customers and you're going to be successful.

This environment fosters people really caring about each other. When you work as many hours as we do in the hospitality industry, to have people that care about you causes a great loyalty factor.

In Courtyard, the people get to be incredibly entrepreneurial. Our general managers and their teams really run their businesses.

### For Marriott, how critical has it been to build a diverse workforce, and have you seen much advancement for women in your industry?

I have seen huge advances over the past 25 years. What is different about Courtyard in particular is that we have always had a high level of female general managers – even 20 years ago, we were about 50/50.

In our Select Service and Extended Stay brands, we have done a very good job of promoting women.

Full service is a different case. I had been a full-service general manager for the past 15 years, prior to coming to this job. When I started there, I was one of just a few. But when I left, there was a large number of us. ●