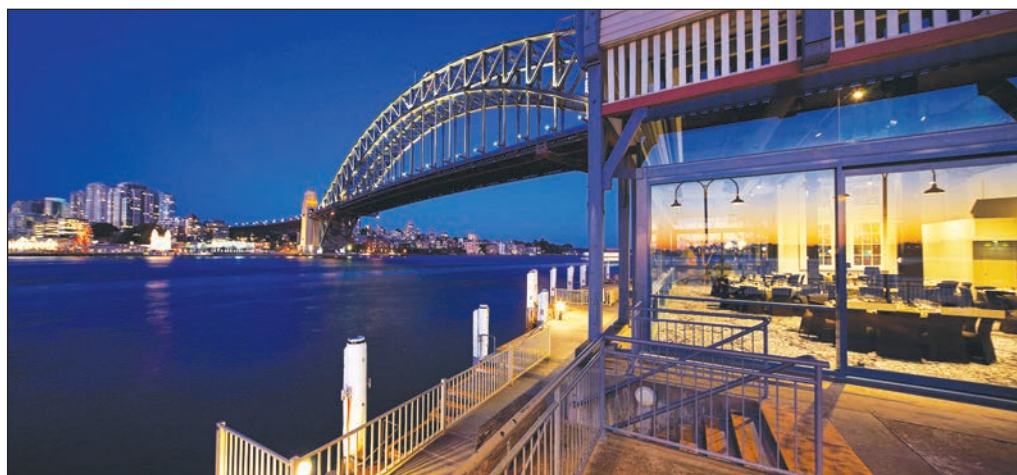


Hospitality

A Reward for Independents

An Interview with Amanda Altree,
Senior Director-Global Marketing,
Autograph Collection Hotels, Marriott International, Inc.



Pier One Sydney Harbour, an Autograph Collection Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE Since joining Marriott in 1998, Amanda Altree has held positions of varying levels of responsibility in disciplines including sales, lodging development, and marketing. Most recently, she held the position of Director of Global Partnerships for Marriott International, responsible for cultivating business relationships and setting strategic direction for Marriott's credit card, car rental, and airline partnerships. Altree assumed her current role with Autograph Collection Hotels in early 2011. She received her B.A. from Gettysburg College.



Amanda Altree

COMPANY BRIEF Autograph Collection Hotels (autographhotels.com) is Marriott International's newest business venture in the lifestyle lodging segment. The collection is an evolving ensemble of strikingly independent hotels. Like nothing else, each destination has been selected for its quality, bold originality, rich character, and uncommon details. From near to far, iconic to historic, the result is an array of properties that is unique and nothing short of collectively exceptional.

What was the vision that drove the creation of Autograph Collection?

The collection was inspired by a couple of things. We realized just how strong our sales and marketing channels were relative to other brands and independent hotels during the recession in 2008 and 2009. Marriott brands were gaining market share despite the downturn in the economy. We wanted to offer more choices to guests and reach new customers not just looking for a hotel room, but for an experience. We found a perfect opportunity to partner with independent hotels – give them access to our sales platforms and they'd help us reach new customers.

The Casa Monica was our first hotel, which opened in March 2010. We're just four years old and we number 60 hotels. It's the fastest full-service brand launch ever in the hotel business.

How do you determine if a property will fit into the collection?

We're looking for the right hotels in the right markets; hotels with details that make

them unique and memorable for consumers.

The fun thing about Autograph Collection is that the structures themselves are so unique – we have palaces, old bank buildings, and historic landmarks that don't really fit into a branded experience – they offer one-of-a-kind architecture and handcrafted moldings. They are much more emblematic of their place and location. Consumers have really changed and today's travelers have a different mindset.

They're now seeking enrichment when they travel, and they want to share their experiences with friends and family. Autograph Collection hotels have interesting, authentic stories behind them.

How important is it for you to build awareness for Autograph Collection as opposed to each property brand?

We focus on independent brands, which is why we look for hotels that are known locally and already have some equity in their own name. The Algonquin, for example, has such a storied history that Autograph Collection serves as the curator to help introduce this legacy to a global audience.

We let Marriott Rewards members know that Marriott now offers a very new product, and there's so much demand among these customers – as soon as these hotels convert, 50 percent of their room nights and revenue come from Marriott Rewards members.

First and foremost, it is about bringing new choices to customers, and tapping into new customers that already love the Algonquin even before knowing it's affiliated with Marriott. We want them to know there are 60 other hotels they'll like that have a unique story and point of view on hospitality.

You've also put a major focus on social media. Why has that been so critical?

People love to share stories – especially about their travels, so we want to give them a forum to talk about what they like and don't like in a hotel experience. Social media is probably the best way for us to reach new customers and let them be our testimonials. It's also a great way to share content about topics we know our customers love like design, art, food, and architecture.

Today's customer is much more influenced by reviews and comments from peers than from what a hotel company says. We can learn as much from an unfavorable review as we can from a good one – they all help us deliver a better experience.

How does Marriott maintain an entrepreneurial feel at such a size and scale?

There is a palpable culture at Marriott. The founders of the company were pioneering entrepreneurs. They've been innovating since the Depression; and continued innovating in airline catering, amusement parks, and cruise lines. They've always been fearless in trying new business ventures. All of us that work for Marriott pick this up quickly when we join the company. Our willingness to try new things has led us in smart directions. Even our competitors would acknowledge that the vision behind this industry has come largely from Marriott's leadership, so brands like Autograph Collection and Edition – our partnership with Ian Schrager – shouldn't be surprising. In our culture, it's expected to look for new and better ways of doing things.

Are you concerned that a reliance on technology will interfere with the personal relationship that is the hallmark of good hospitality?

Technology is going to make a lot of information more relevant for customers. As a hospitality business, our customers don't expect to deal with digital channels 100 percent of the time. But if we can make things faster and easier through digital and mobile technology, and to the extent we can give customers more control, that's what drives our innovation.

Autograph Collection has the smallest Marriott hotel with a 15-room lodge in Colorado, and we have the largest hotel in Marriott's portfolio, The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. Technology plays a role in both of those properties in a way that makes life easier for the guest.

How large can the collection get?

There isn't a target number. The important thing for us is to continue to add hotels that we know will benefit from our channels that offer a great experience for customers.

As long as we stay consistent in our search for quality hotels and fabulous experiences, we can grow this to any size globally. ●