

The Essence of The Algonquin

An Interview with Manuela Rappenecker,
General Manager, The Algonquin Hotel



The entrance of The Algonquin Hotel on Manhattan's West 44th Street

EDITORS' NOTE *Manuela Rappenecker assumed her current post in June of 2014. Prior to this, she was General Manager at The Renaissance New York Hotel 57 from October 2012. She was an Adjunct Professor in the Hospitality School at Florida Atlantic University and she has held the role of Resident Manager at Harbor Beach Marriott Resort & Spa and Director of Operations at Fort Lauderdale Marina Marriott. She was also Adjunct Professor in the Hospitality School at Johnson & Wales University and Executive Assistant Manager, Rooms Division at The Ritz-Carlton, Philadelphia. Earlier, she held various managerial positions at several Marriott properties. She received her Master of Business Administration Degree from Florida Atlantic University and her Bachelor's Degree in Marketing/Marketing Management from Florida State University-College of Business.*



Manuela Rappenecker

PROPERTY BRIEF *The Algonquin Hotel (algonquinhotel.com) is located in the heart of Midtown Manhattan on Club Row at 44th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, just steps from Broadway's theaters and world-class shopping. Home to The Algonquin Round Table made famous by Dorothy Parker and birthplace of The New Yorker, The Algonquin Hotel, which opened in 1902, recently unveiled a \$15-million renovation. Changes include upgrades of the historic lobby's furnishings, the Blue Bar, the renowned Round Table Room restaurant, and all suites and guest rooms.*

Where is the market today and is there growth in it?

As we look to 2016/2017/2018, we're looking at the increase of supply that is going to happen. Much of that growth is happening in the downtown area as well as Brooklyn, which can likely support that more than other areas in the city.

What is amazing about New York City is there is unlimited demand throughout the year that continues to drive our occupancies.

Where it might get dicey at times is the rate piece. Hopefully, some of the new people on the block are just as focused on ensuring the right mix between occupancy and rate as we are.

How valuable has the relationship with the Autograph Collection been?

It's the fastest growing brand within our entire portfolio at Marriott. I think we just bumped up to over 100 properties worldwide.

The tagline of the Autograph Collection is, "Exactly like nothing else." Many travelers are looking for that unique experience while still benefitting from getting their Marriott benefits and knowing they will get the consistency in the service piece.

However, we still have to put the seal of The Algonquin on everything we do so it all continues to tell a story throughout, be it our print material, our menus, or how we present ourselves.

Are you happy with where the product is and are there changes planned?

We have benefitted from a complete hotel renovation in 2012 and I have a fantastic group of ladies and gentlemen in our housekeeping and engineering departments, and they do a wonderful job of the upkeep. Also, the designers did a wonderful job of retaining the essence of The Algonquin and the story it has to tell in the guest rooms.

When one sits in the lobby and looks at the details in the ceiling and the woodwork, it becomes clear that hotels like this aren't built anymore because it's cost-prohibitive.

How critical has it been to be modern while maintaining that heritage and feel?

The biggest opportunity for us to grow is in the millennial base of business. We offer free Internet in the lobby and in the guest rooms so guests can be on their devices 24/7, but they also like to be able to attach an experience to their stay as well.

In 2015, we launched our new vanity website, and they've done an excellent job of telling our story but making it relevant to that generation.

How challenging is the food and beverage part of the business?

We have a few distinct outlets, which is nice. We have the Blue Bar, which has made some great lists this year. We've had some great placements in print articles with regard to the Blue Bar experience. We get a lot of local businesspeople from Sixth Avenue and within a few block radius that keep the Blue Bar busy.

It morphs into a different experience at the Lobby Bar because guests are so diverse. We do a tremendous amount of pre- and post-theater business there.

At the Roundtable, we've changed our menus. Our chef changes them quarterly and tries to bring in a local New York State and New Jersey farm-to-table experience. We are doing anywhere upwards of 100-plus breakfasts every morning. We have a lot of in-house guests but a lot of people are coming in to experience a different breakfast.

We're continuing to try to gain exposure as it relates to lunch and dinner options.

How critical is it today to offer a more personalized guest experience?

What will set us apart from any of the new or existing properties that line 44th Street alone is the staff and associates, the relationships they're building because they are closest to the customer.

It has been wonderful since I've been here. We're a results-driven company so we can see how our guests are rating us and we have had significant increases in our scores with all of the same associates.

Many recognize our repeat customers but they're also from New York City and know where to send guests who want an indigenous experience, and it's really about them creating relationships because they're close to the customer.

Our staff also understands that everyone is a salesperson here.

What advice do you give potential GMs early on?

I teach a graduate-level class in hospitality at NYU. It's one of the burning questions many of these students have because many have never had hands-on hotel experiences.

They all think they will graduate and become general managers but with many of the students, they realize that they have to get their foot in the door and work their way up.

It's important to get a good foundation of operational experience and understand the dynamics of that, but what is key is getting revenue management and/or some sales experience, because as a GM, one has to make sure those things are firing, more specifically revenue management and sales, because if those things aren't happening, then operations folks won't have guests to take care of.

Are the opportunities there to grow, and what do you tell women about the type of careers the hotel business can offer them?

I never felt there was a glass ceiling in this company. I've mentored many young ladies in the company, and the sky is the limit. We have a great system of helping prepare them for that next level. The other piece is helping build their confidence that they are ready for those next roles. ●