



A Lifestyle Multi-Brand Platform

An Interview with Niki Leondakis,
Chief Executive Officer, Commune Hotels & Resorts



tommie Hudson Square meeting area (left) and the living area of the Carmen Miranda Suite at the Thompson Miami Beach (above)

EDITORS' NOTE One of the leading women executives in hospitality, Niki Leondakis joined Commune Hotels & Resorts in 2012, after serving 19 years at Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, most recently as its President and Chief Operating Officer. The force behind Commune's global growth, Leondakis has expanded the company's Thompson Hotels and Joie de Vivre Hotels brands, as well as introduced the Singapore-based Alila Hotels and Resorts, and soon-to-be launched tommie to the corporate portfolio. Just as important is Leondakis' goal of creating a workplace culture that instills pride and ownership among employees. This has led to numerous awards and accolades including being recognized as one of the "Best Places to Work for 2015" by Crain's New York and rankings on both the San Francisco Business Times' "Best Places to Work 2015" and Chicago Tribune's "Chicago's Top Workplaces" lists. Personally, Leondakis has been named one of the "2015 Bay Area Most Admired CEOs" by the San Francisco Business Times as well as the magazine's "100 Most Influential Women," from 2013 to 2015.



Niki Leondakis

COMPANY BRIEF Formed in 2011, Commune Hotels & Resorts (communehotels.com) is an international, multi-brand lifestyle hotel management company, which manages and operates Thompson Hotels, a luxury lifestyle brand; Joie de Vivre Hotels, a collection of independently branded boutique hotels; tommie, a micro lifestyle hotel brand launching in early 2016; and Alila Hotels and Resorts, a collection of boutique luxury properties in Asia. The San Francisco-based company manages more than 45 hotels and resorts across North America, Asia, and Europe, and is expanding its portfolio internationally, with a new presence in Mexico.

Will you explain the history of Commune Hotels & Resorts and how its brands relate to each other?

Commune was formed when two separately founded lifestyle boutique hotel brands were merged to become part of one hotel management company. Geolo Capital bought Joie de Vivre Hotels in 2010 and merged it with Thompson Hotels in 2011, which is when Commune Hotels & Resorts was formed as a platform for boutique and lifestyle hotels. At that point, the idea for tommie started to come to life, and that brand's first

property will launch in New York City. The addition of Alila brings the total number of brands under the corporate umbrella to four.

We're the only multi-brand platform dedicated exclusively to the lifestyle and boutique sector in hospitality.

Is the market for the brands a similar clientele? How do you determine the sweet spot for each brand?

There is a bit of crossover from brand to brand, but each brand has a distinct position in the marketplace.

Thompson Hotels is a luxury lifestyle brand. It's generally in urban and primary markets, though we recently expanded the brand to resort destinations and are targeting select secondary markets. The brand was born in New York City, where it currently has two hotels, and has additional properties in Chicago, Toronto, London, Miami, and Mexico. Cities with hotels in development include New York City, Seattle, and Nashville.

Joie de Vivre Hotels is a collection of independently branded boutique hotels in primary and secondary markets. The way the hotel operates is integrated into the neighborhood conceptually and experientially for our guests.

What's common across the brands is that they each have their own position in the marketplace and their own target customer. Thompson Hotels is intended for an urban, sophisticated, and global traveler; Joie de Vivre Hotels is a collection that is playful and appeals to families and young urban professionals; tommie is targeting the youthful and open-minded traveler who is socially and culturally curious; and Alila targets the immersive experience seeker.

How big can the Thompson brand grow, and is the focus on international expansion?

We have locations in the U.S. that we're targeting for more Thompson Hotels, so we will see the brand expand domestically. We're also focused on Asia and Europe for international development. Thompson Hotels will remain rooted in primary markets and urban locations, although we are doing some resorts, including two that recently opened in Mexico.

How far do you go with technology and does it enhance or detract from the guest experience?

Some hotel brands use technology to increase efficiency. We are interested in using technology to enhance the guest experience. We're not being prescriptive about technology.

For example, we recently launched a personalized guest communication program that enables conversations between guests and hotels through any mobile channel to allow for faster and more efficient communication. The goal is to give people a choice. If they want to bypass the front desk and check-in experience, it's our intent to use technology to enable them to do so.

However, many guests still want human interaction, so we won't use technology to limit the human touch. This is the hallmark of our brand and a thread that is part of our DNA throughout Commune – to provide exceptional and personalized guest service.

We also use technology to track guest preferences and experiences across our portfolio so we can better serve them.

How challenging is it to be successful in food and beverage?

What plagued hotel companies for years was treating hotel restaurants as hotel food and beverage outlets instead of as independent restaurants.

Restaurants are living, breathing businesses that need to have souls and be rooted in the communities in which they are located. There isn't a brand or corporate-wide solution to food and beverage that works. It has to be driven locally.

In each of our Thompson Hotels, we focus on location and neighborhood, and partner with top-flight, local talent already loved by the community. If we can create a restaurant concept and have a local chef or operator partner with us, we stand a chance of having it viewed as an independent restaurant as opposed to a hotel food and beverage outlet.

How important is it to build brand awareness around the Commune name?

Commune is a B-to-B identity. The platform is a holding company or an endorser brand, but not necessarily known by the consumer. For the consumer, we focus on the individual hotel brands. Our customers know Thompson and Joie de Vivre, and they will soon know tommie, along with Alila once we bring the luxury brand's concept stateside from Asia. Our DNA, which is present across all of our brands, includes an intense focus on the guest, and a passion for hospitality and service delivery to create memorable experiences.

How difficult is it for women to grow their careers in this male-dominated space?

The opportunities are there, though the statistics don't reflect it. It's improving, albeit slowly, and the emerging leaders of the future include many more women. ●