

Hospitality Marketing, Revenue Management, and Distribution

An Interview with Michael W. Tall,
President and Chief Operating Officer, Charlestowne Hotels



The HarbourView Inn in Charleston, South Carolina

EDITORS' NOTE Michael Tall joined Charlestowne Hotels in 2004 to provide guidance in marketing, e-commerce, and revenue management initiatives. Since becoming co-owner of the company in 2008, he has made it a priority to recruit and hire the industry's top talent and to expand the company's client base. Under his leadership, Charlestowne Hotels' portfolio has doubled in size twice. Previously, Tall worked for Rock Resorts (a subsidiary of Vail Resorts) as a corporate analyst as well as the director of revenue for the former Ritz Carlton Rancho Mirage. He has also worked with companies such as The Savoy Group, Kiawah Island Resorts, and Xerox. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Marketing from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and received his Master's Degree in Hotel Management from Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.



Michael W. Tall

A few people around town saw what my partner was doing and asked him to manage their hotels which were, for the most part, in Charleston. By the 2000's, his team began to manage properties outside Charleston located towards Myrtle Beach.

I joined the firm in 2004 to spearhead the revenue management and e-commerce divisions, a part of the business that was becoming imperative for distribution and marketing at that time. I also led website development, which was my background.

We eventually joined together as one cohesive team because we saw an opportunity to combine both sides of the business to maximize profitability within the hotels we managed, and we weren't seeing it done in the same way by other groups we knew. From 2007 to 2012, we grew exponentially, and we've since doubled in size twice.

We offer our portfolio of properties an advantage: they can rely on industry-leading expertise in critical channels such as marketing, revenue management, and distribution – our core competencies. Further, through our signature hands-on approach, we're able to maximize human resources, operational efficiencies, and purchasing power to do what other companies simply don't do.

We manage each of our hotel clients independently and in a way that is unique to that specific property. That is the differentiator.

Is there a sweet spot for the type of properties under management or are you reaching multiple segments?

Much of it depends on the property and ownership's vision or goal for the asset. To be successful, we must develop an understanding for the goals of the owner and create a plan to meet that goal as quickly as possible.

On the operational side, success is dependent on tailoring our management style to each individual property. One of our core competencies is identifying the aspects of a property's systems that can be improved or enhanced. We are then able to set in place individualized programs for that property that meet topline revenue maximization goals while ensuring that the hotel's service levels continue to exceed guest expectations.

Over the past few years, there has been a tremendous shift within the industry for lifestyle boutique hotels. This is based on the desire of the traveler to get a unique experience, whether traveling for work or pleasure. We have experienced

success in the lifestyle boutique space for many years, so the shift of the industry has been very good for us.

How critical has it been to manage growth?

One of the challenges is always how to staff up, even if the pipeline isn't there to provide desired profitability.

There are times we need to make investments in people and in infrastructure so we can be ready for new accounts and chase new business.

How important is brand awareness for the Charlestowne name?

It's all about the individual properties. Charlestowne Hotels is positioned to be a support system for the hotels. It's the platform and processes by which the hotel is successful while also creating synergies of success for the on-property leadership team.

We have grown organically and have found that word-of-mouth and business relationships bring us the kind of clients we want to work with. We have a good relationship with them because they understand what we're promising to deliver and we understand what they're asking us to deliver.

Is it hard to differentiate in your space?

We like to think the proof is in the individual assets we manage. While the hotels we look after are all different, a new hotel coming onboard usually looks to the hotels we have to note similarities in what we're doing to what they want to do.

If there is a project that may be potentially lucrative but we don't think we can deliver on it, we'll usually say no.

Is there a focus on certain markets or does it depend on the individual opportunity?

There are certainly markets that would be great for us to be in (for example, Charlotte, Atlanta, Miami, D.C., and New Orleans) and we are chasing opportunities there, but finding the right clients ensures a longer term success for us.

When you joined the company in 2004, did you know it would be the right fit, and has it been what you expected?

It became clear that we were creating something special here because the people we were surrounding ourselves with had knowledge that was at the forefront of what other groups were doing in the Southeast. We capitalized on that by moving quickly and creating value within the company as a first-mover in the Southeast, and it created a waterfall. ●

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1980, Charlestowne Hotels (charlestownehotels.com) is a leading full-service hospitality management company offering innovative expertise in hotel development, operational controls, marketing management, revenue optimization, and financial reporting. One of the top ranked hotel management companies in the U.S., Charlestowne properties consistently achieve RevPAR growth nearly double the national average. The brand offers a robust portfolio of independent hotels and resorts, franchised properties and condo-hotels around the country. Known for a proficient management style that pays close attention to guest experience, properties under Charlestowne Hotels regularly receive industry accolades on Condé Nast Traveler's Gold List and Readers' Choice Awards, Travel + Leisure's World's Best Awards – most recently for "Top City Hotels in the Continental U.S." and "Top 100 Best Hotels in the World," and top standings on TripAdvisor.

Will you talk about the heritage of Charlestowne Hotels and the vision for the company?

We were started in the early '80s by my business partner in Charleston. He bought a few hotels and he paid other people to manage those hotels but wasn't getting the desired performance. He decided to create a management company and began to hire people to manage the hotels he owns.