

# Hospitality



## The Mohegan Way



**An Interview with John Washko,  
Vice President of Exhibitions and  
Conventions Sales, Mohegan Sun**

*Tuscany restaurant (left); The Mohegan Sun Sky and Earth Tower (above)*

**EDITORS' NOTE** John Washko assumed his current post in 2017. He previously held executive level roles with Atlantis in Paradise Island, Bahamas and The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. In addition, he was VP of Sales and Marketing for Elite Meetings International. Washko, a James Madison University graduate, was recognized as one of the Top 25 Extraordinary Minds in Sales & Marketing in 2015 by HSMIAI.



John Washko

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Owned by Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, Mohegan Sun ([mohegansun.com](http://mohegansun.com)) is one of the largest, most spectacular entertainment, gaming, dining and shopping destinations in the United States. Situated on 185 acres along the Thames River in scenic southeastern Connecticut, Mohegan Sun is home to three unique casinos, 1,600 deluxe hotel rooms, two world-class spas, a golf course, over 90 shops, restaurants and bars as well as three award-winning entertainment venues including a 10,000-seat Arena. Mohegan Sun is within easy access of New York, Boston, Hartford and Providence and located 15 minutes from the museums, antique shops and waterfront of Mystic Country.

### **What excited you about the opportunity to join Mohegan Sun?**

It was the combination of the amazing culture that exists from ownership and executive leadership, along with Mohegan Sun's independent status. My background throughout my career has been working in sales and marketing with a focus on the meetings, conventions and expo segment at major independent properties. I'm not a brand guy. I like to work for independent properties because I can add value in many more aspects of the business and everything that encompasses the guest experience. I'm invigorated by organizations that can make decisions that are in the best interests of the customer, so when this opportunity to work for a major independent resort with a customer-centric culture presented itself, it was a perfect fit.

### **How do you define your role?**

My role is to oversee the sales and servicing of anything that we deem as a group, from 10 rooms to 1,200 rooms. It can range from a

small social group to a major convention with 1,000-plus guest rooms per night.

### **Is there a sweet spot for Mohegan Sun within that range?**

While Mohegan is large, we will always find that the small to midsize meetings from across the country will make up the majority of meetings held here.

We draw heavily from the Northeast and New England regions, which are our strongest drivers.

People take advantage of our accessibility options that include two airports, as well as close proximity to Amtrak. A number of our smaller groups, being based in the Northeast/New England area, can drive, which eliminates the need to book discount airfares.

We are adding a significant function space enhancement that opens next summer. It is focused on increasing our ability to accommodate groups that have a much larger meeting space requirement.

Currently, our largest ballroom is around 38,000 square feet. We will soon have something four times that size.

### **How competitive is the marketplace?**

Very competitive, because we never competed against convention centers before. Now our competitive set has expanded because we're now going head-to-head with the big-box hotels as well as convention centers.

### **How hard is it to differentiate in this space?**

The industry has shifted so a lot of the dialogue back and forth is being done through what we call the ERFPP companies, which submit electronic request for proposals. They don't really want to talk to us coming out of the gate; they want to do their initial qualification based on whether we have availability, our rooms costs, and our average food and beverage costs. They can plug that into a spreadsheet along with a few other competing localities or areas of the country. They'll use that to vet down the decision-making process because it can all be done efficiently through keystrokes.

The challenge and opportunity for sales organizations and leaders is how to articulate the value proposition behind what makes our experience, which we call The Mohegan Way, unique and, most importantly, more memorable than others from our competitive set.

What also made this role compelling for me was the culture that exists at Mohegan Sun – I work for a family. The family is the Mohegan Tribe, and this culture is based on 13 generations of history. This is very different from anything else out there. The spirit of Aquai that exists here has four basic principles, which are to be welcoming, mutual respect, cooperation and building relationships. Our basic premise is that visitors come in as customers but they leave as friends.

We judge how successful we are based on numerical analysis of our customer base, which tells us that 70 percent of our large groups are repeat customers. There is no greater compliment than repeat business.

### **Does your hiring focus primarily on culture fit?**

Yes. It's really about the fit, because this is a unique culture. The industry has changed. The majority of the properties out there have institutional investors, which has created a different environment for the team member/ownership relationship. The Mohegan Tribe takes amazing care of the team members here and they realize we will succeed or fail based on our associates being able to exemplify The Mohegan Way in their interactions with our customers.

I want everyone who works here to come in with an expectation of having fun and bringing a positive outlook to the day.

### **How important is it to personalize the guest experience?**

Personalization can be challenging within a group environment because the organization is setting the structure for the event.

That said, there are still areas where we can channel a feeling of personalization through our guest interaction. Guests take away more from how our people made them feel during their stays than anything else.

Our team members provide an emotional takeaway and create positive memories. If we have a team that makes a sincere effort, it goes a long way in overcoming any bump in the road.

### **Have you been surprised by your experiences thus far at Mohegan Sun?**

I've been pleasantly surprised. I've worked with some really great properties. These are great people and there are no egos in the room. We put our heads together and don't take ourselves too seriously, even though we obviously put a lot of effort into what we do. People feel they can make a difference here. ●