

Hospitality



Smart Luxury



An Interview with Marlene Poynder,
General Manager, Conrad New York

The Conrad New York lobby (left) and exterior (right)

EDITORS' NOTE Marlene Poynder brings an impressive 30 years of experience in the tourism and hospitality fields to Conrad New York, having managed luxury hotels in Australia, Asia and the U.S. Most recently, she served as the general manager at Waldorf Astoria Chicago. She joined Hilton in 2010 serving as the pre-opening and opening general manager of Hilton Queenstown and Kawarau Hotel. From 2012 to 2013, she held roles in the Australasia corporate regional office and in Dalian, China, on behalf of Conrad Hotels & Resorts. In 2013, she became general manager of Waldorf Astoria Beijing, overseeing the hotel opening. She also served as interim general manager of Conrad and DoubleTree by Hilton hotels in Haitang Bay, Sanya, China, before taking on the general manager position at Waldorf Astoria Chicago. Prior to joining Hilton, Poynder held a variety of executive roles with Hyatt Hotels in Asia and Australia.



Marlene Poynder

PROPERTY BRIEF In March 2012, Conrad New York (conradnewyork.com) opened its doors in New York City's Battery Park City neighborhood. Rising 16 stories along the Hudson River waterfront, the 463 all-suite luxury hotel is the first New York location for Conrad Hotels & Resorts, the global luxury brand of Hilton Worldwide. Conrad New York features spacious suites, each outfitted with integrated technology and individual climate control. The hotel features Loopy Doopy, a seasonal rooftop bar with breathtaking views of the Statue of Liberty and New York Harbor and Atrio Wine Bar and Restaurant, the hotel's New American cuisine themed all day dining restaurant. Conrad New York boasts over 30,000 square feet of adaptable meeting space, including the 6,200 square-foot Gallery Ballroom. The hotel was awarded a LEED Gold Certificate for new construction from the U.S. Green Building Council for sustainable building practices and design.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Conrad New York?

I was excited to come to New York as I have always wanted to live and work in the city. I came to the U.S. at this stage in my career because the market here has always been buoyant. I wanted to work in the strongest market in our industry and New York is just that.

I'm happy to be able to stay within a luxury brand and to build on the reputation of this property.

How do you define the Conrad brand and is that definition well understood in the U.S. market?

In other parts of the world, the Conrad brand is well-recognized because we have a larger footprint. We certainly are building on that in the U.S. with Chicago reopening in 2016, Fort Lauderdale having opened recently and Washington D.C. due to open in 2019. The London NYC hotel has joined our luxury division this month and is going to be renovated in 2018 and will also help to define the Conrad luxury brand within the U.S.

We are developing a nucleus of hotels in the U.S. that represent the Conrad brand, which is a smart and modern luxury brand that tends to attract millennials as well as more mature travelers.

We're also an all-suite hotel and the synergies between what will be the two Conrads in New York, Conrad New York and The London NYC, will give us even more strength in this market.

What are your views of the hotel's Downtown location?

From a group and conference perspective, the business is extremely strong. What I find surprising about the area of Lower Manhattan as well as the hotel is that it's equally busy on the weekends and weekdays.

Is your competitive set primarily Downtown or does it extend throughout New York City?

It depends on which market we're looking at. Certainly for the leisure traveler, it's geographic. For our conference and meetings business, our competition is further uptown because we have the largest event space in this part of Lower Manhattan.

How important is your suite component and how broad is this offering?

There is a common feel throughout the suites, and they're quite modern and streamlined, which suits the whole North End area and what is being built in the Lower Manhattan area.

The artwork in our hotel, for example, is quite striking and it carries through to the suites. Our guests are sometimes surprised when they come into our suites because they are generous in size, which works well for us.

How do you balance having a significant-sized lobby with making sure there is always someone to greet guests?

The wonderful advantage of coming into a hotel that is operating as well as ours is that our customer service and experience scores are in the top three in North America and, within the Conrad brand, we're in the top five globally.

For such a large and imposing lobby space, our team does an incredible job of welcoming people. This means that when any of us have time available, we have a presence in our lobby. Once guests are greeted by the doormen, we need to make sure they know where they're going because it can be intimidating to walk into our hotel for the first time.

What is the focus of the food and beverage offering at Conrad New York?

The offering has to be relevant for our guests and the area and, for this part of New York, there are a lot of options just outside of our doors.

With ATRIO Wine Bar and Restaurant, we see a lot of the local community embracing our specialty menus such as Easter Brunch, Thanksgiving, New Years Eve and we equally see a lot of interest in our private dining spaces for holiday parties and special occasions.

We're primarily focused on continuing the success of our Loopy Doopy Rooftop Bar in the summer season, as it is tremendously popular with hotel guests and locals alike.

Will you discuss the focus and investment put into retaining talent?

Retaining talent has been a strength on property. Earlier this year, we revamped our sequence of service training and emphasized the basics of luxury training to recalibrate and remind everyone of the personalized approach. The results have been extremely positive from our guest survey responses.

Are there substantial opportunities within the hospitality industry for women?

The opportunities are becoming more prevalent. Frankly, one still has to push the envelope. I was fortunate to enter the industry at a time when companies started to realize that people with a sales and marketing background were very valuable to the General Management ranks. Since there are a significant number of women in sales and marketing, there are more opportunities there. As a female leader, I always encourage all of my employees to have ambitious career goals. Women and men alike are capable of being great GMs in this industry if they can first prove it to themselves. ●