

Hospitality

Hamptonality

An Interview with
Shruti Gandhi Buckley, Global Head, Hampton by Hilton



Hampton by Hilton Ordu, Turkey

EDITORS' NOTE In September 2017, Hilton named Shruti Gandhi Buckley to her current post. She joined Hilton earlier that year as Vice President, Strategic Initiatives, Focused Service Brands. Buckley previously served as vice president and global brand manager of Marriott International's Fairfield Inn & Suites and Protea Hotels brands. Previously, she held marketing and brand management positions with leading organizations including Nestle, Unilever, Estée Lauder, Chanel and National Geographic. Buckley earned her Bachelor of Science degree in business administration from the University of California at Berkeley



Shruti Gandhi Buckley

COMPANY BRIEF As the number-one ranked franchise for the past eight years according to Entrepreneur®, Hampton by Hilton (Hampton.com), including Hampton Inn by Hilton and Hampton Inn & Suites by Hilton, serves value-conscious and quality-driven travelers with more than 2,275 properties with nearly 230,000 rooms in 18 countries and territories. High quality accommodations and amenities, such as complimentary Wi-Fi, free, hot breakfast and On the Run™ breakfast bags, contribute to Hampton by Hilton ranking as a leader in its segment. Hampton by Hilton Team Members deliver friendly, authentic, caring and thoughtful service defined as Hamptonality. Each Hampton by Hilton hotel offers complete satisfaction with the 100 percent Hampton® Guarantee. Hampton by Hilton is part of Hilton Honors, the award-winning guest-loyalty program for Hilton's 14 distinct hotel brands. Hilton Honors members who book directly through preferred Hilton channels have access to instant benefits, including a flexible payment slider that allows members to choose nearly any combination of points and money to book a stay, an exclusive member discount that can't be found anywhere else, free standard Wi-Fi and digital amenities like digital check-in with room selection and Digital Key (select locations), available exclusively through the industry-leading Hilton Honors app.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Hampton by Hilton?

There were a number of things I found exciting about coming to lead a key brand. Having worked at a key competitor for many years in the same tier, I spent years observing Hampton,

which has clearly been the market leader for as long as I can remember. The opportunity seemed to be, if I can't beat them, I might as well join them, and that is exactly what I did.

What is so intriguing about this brand is that not only is it the market and clear category leader today, but it has been for so many years – it has an incredible strength and legacy behind it, year over year, of consistent performance. When we look at the brands out there across all tiers in hospitality, that is a difficult objective to achieve.

Now, I'm challenged with ensuring we maintain that strength and leadership position going forward, and this is also intriguing.

What is the secret to Hampton's consistent leadership?

There are several key components to its success. Certainly, having a great leader in place prior to my coming into this role has really helped to move the brand forward into a place of strength.

Hilton has also made a real commitment to ensuring consistent investment in Hampton year after year. It's a brand that has been a market leader in many areas – it was the first to introduce complimentary breakfast into the tier and the first to introduce the Hampton Guarantee. These innovations have helped the category evolve and have continued to position Hampton as the brand that sets the bar, understands its consumers and evolves in a way that meets their needs so they stay loyal to the brand.

Another very important aspect of the brand is its financial performance. This great loyalty from consumers has enabled the brand to achieve tremendous financial success and great returns for our owners.

We're 33 years old and still command almost a 20 percent RevPAR premium over the category and double-digit RevPAR premiums over key competitors in our category. This makes it a really exciting place to be.

How much opportunity is there for growth and are there particular markets where you see opportunities?

We have close to 2,200 hotels in the United States, so we have a strong penetration, but there are certainly always opportunities to grow.

In the U.S., we primarily serve urban gateway cities and secondary urban markets. We also have our attention focused on global growth in some of the key international markets,

especially China, the broader Asia-Pacific area and Latin America where the desire and need for quality and consistently branded hotels is growing.

I also don't want to dismiss Europe and the Middle East, where we have had exponential growth. As a result, we feel there are several countries where we have an opportunity to grow Hampton's footprint even further.

How do you define Hampton's target customer?

The target guest for Hampton is fairly broad in the sense that we have specific amenities and services that both support our business travelers as well as our leisure travelers. It can also vary based on the individual market and where the hotels are based.

What has really helped move the brand is that consumers and guests see this brand as meeting a variety of their needs.

Our target guests are those no-nonsense visitors. They are looking for a straightforward approach and they don't want to be nickel-and-dimed. They want quality, consistency and value. In addition, they're looking for a warm and genuine service approach. The Hampton culture and service is not just an approach, but it's truly a movement which has been the key differentiator for the brand. This is the one brand out of our portfolio that our competitors have not been able to touch.

Will you elaborate on the investment that Hampton puts into its people?

Hampton invests in its top performing leaders through "Ambassador U," which is designed to equip our strongest General Managers with the tools, training and structure to intentionally evolve culture, "pay it forward" within the brand and help us inspire even more Team Members to shine. Additionally, Hilton recently introduced Thrive@Hilton, a philosophy that ensures our associates have balance in their lives. Hampton strongly believes in this. As a result, our associates can take better care of our guests.

When you're consistently the market leader, how important it is to continuously improve?

It's about continuing to remind people that, although we're the market leader, it is always about keeping our finger on the pulse of what is happening beyond the walls of our infrastructure. We keep an eye on competition, even outside the industry, to determine what we might be able to leverage. ●