

Hospitality



Service Culture

An Interview with David I. Cohen,
General Manager, Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York



Manhattan Terrace Suite living area (above);
an atrium terrace (left); Gold Penthouse dining area (below)

EDITORS' NOTE David Cohen was named to his current post in 2015. He began his career as a Four Seasons Hotel management trainee at New York City's Pierre Hotel in 1984. Prior to joining Hôtel Plaza Athénée, Cohen ran his own hotel consulting business and before this, he oversaw New York hotel operations for TPG Hospitality. Cohen also held General Manager positions at New York's historic Warwick Hotel and Le Parker Meridien and was Resident Manager of the RIGHA Royal. In addition, he was a member of the opening team for The Ritz-Carlton Battery Park and The Ritz-Carlton Central Park South. Cohen received his B.S. degree from the Hospitality School at Rochester Institute of Technology as well as a degree from the Centre International de Glion in Switzerland. He also holds an associate's degree from The University of Hartford in Connecticut.



David I. Cohen

PROPERTY BRIEF Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York (plaza-athenee.com) is steps from some of the city's most revered attractions, including Central Park, Museum Mile, and Madison Avenue shopping. The 143-room luxury boutique hotel has been the home-away-from-home for sophisticated travelers from around the world for over two decades. Owned by the TCC Group of Thailand, it is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World.

Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York has gone through a transformation over the past three years. Are you happy with where the product is today and what are your plans for the future?

I'm comfortable with the product we have today. I would like it to be newer sooner. Three years ago, we had a three-phased plan and we have finished the first and second phases. We are now waiting to complete the third phase, which will be in 2019, and will include all the guest rooms, bathrooms and hallways of the hotel. This is scheduled and we're excited about it. We are waiting for ownership's final approval on styles and brands. We know what we want to do – we have surveyed hotels from all over the world to find the good, the bad and the ugly and what we want and don't want. We have also spent a lot of time with our guests asking them what they want and don't want.

We are ready and now it's a matter of ownership commitment, which I believe is coming. The physical product we have right now is the best it can be.

The most important thing for me is the level of service we're providing. Right now, if there is anything to choose from in the hotel that one would consider the best, it would be our phenomenal team of managers and employees, especially in New York City where most people might not say that.

I'm comfortable saying that 95 percent of our entire team is some of the best in New York City. They know our guests, they greet our guests and engage with them. They have cared for guests who have had generations of family members who have visited us. It's always very special to see the engagement.

The guests know us or get to know us and they keep coming back, and that stems from the service at the hotel and the service is all about the staff.

The staff is what I am most proud of.



What are the keys to making a hotel restaurant and food and beverage operations successful?

The success and failure of food and beverage in hotels is strictly based on catering and banquets. If we were a hotel in New York City that had 12,000 to 15,000 square feet of banquet space with a main room of a certain size, then we would have the opportunity to make money; at any size below that, no one can make money and food and beverage becomes an amenity.

My logic is based on the fact that we have a limited amount of catering and banquet space which we have made more flexible over the past three years, so we can sell the main dining room out for an event in conjunction with the banquet space.

Even though it is difficult to make money on food and beverage, we have to understand that there is a value to this service, be it offering a power breakfast or room service, which we do 24 hours a day, as well as in the lounge and bar environment. Our success comes from having a very good chef and consistently putting out a great product.

Many luxury hotels lease out their food and beverage space. The risk factor changes because the odds are that money is still being lost, just someone else is losing it. If I'm going to lose money, I will lose it because of me.

Amenities such as room service and valet, as well as a concierge, mean that we can ask for a higher rate. Our concierge services are particularly valuable because we can fill any request as long as the guest is willing to pay for it. All of these are amenities, but they also contribute to the room rate. I can drive rate higher than my competitors by offering these services. Our competitors are continuing to reduce services like these while we're maintaining them.

Do you look at the spa offering similarly?

Valmont negotiated with us to come in and operate our spa. They hire their own people and manage it. In 2018, their business was up 45 percent. Before they were managing it, the spa was losing money consistently every month.

They have great products and services and they have a great following inside and outside the hotel.

It has been a perfect marriage. As a brand and product, Valmont is outstanding.

Is it harder today for a general manager to be with guests and focus on hospitality with the impact of technology and the financial pressures of the business?

Yes. I've gotten much better at technology and I appreciate it, but the day I become 100 percent technology, that will be my last day in the industry. I push toward being 65 percent in the operation and 35 percent in the office because I get to see the staff and the guests, and I get a feeling of how well the hotel is operating. That can't be done from an office. I have to know what is going on.

If something goes wrong, my goal is to get that guest back to show them it was a fluke. Things do go wrong, but when a guest comes back and gives us another chance, we make sure it's perfect. ●