



Puttin' up the Ritz

By Olaf Botermans

It's hard work to accommodate different types who wear day coats or pants with stripes with perfect fits, creating an atmosphere where fashion sits. Puttin' up the Ritz comes at a price. Sure, the rooms are luxurious, the food is good, and amenities of the hotel have a nice ambience. The true added value of the Ritz however comes from the staff's relentless efforts to make your stay a pleasant and memorable one.

This month's speaker is Mr. Robert Lagerwey, General Manager of The Ritz-Carlton Millenia in Singapore. He has worked in the hotel industry in the United States, Asia and Europe. Before his posting to Singapore, he worked at the The Ritz-Carlton, Seoul and before that at the at Four Seasons, Philadelphia and a number of other hotels. He is therefore in an excellent position to shed some light on the inner workings of the hotel to a group who have only seen the front desk while checking in.

The legacy of The Ritz-Carlton begins with the celebrated hotelier César Ritz; the "king of hoteliers and hotelier to kings." His philosophy of service and innovations redefined the luxury hotel experience in Europe through his management of The Ritz in Paris and The Carlton in London.

Board members, Charlotte Ruegg thanks speaker Mr. Robert Lagerwey

In 1927, The Ritz Carlton hotel opened in Boston, based on the philosophy of César Ritz, who died nine years before the opening of the first hotel in the US bearing his name. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company which we know today, commences with the purchase of the Ritz-Carlton in Boston and the purchase of rights to The Ritz-Carlton name by William B. Johnson in 1983.

In the early nineties, The Ritz Carlton wasn't doing terribly well. Apparently, the costs of running such an upmarket hotel were getting out of control and there were not so many kings and queens around to cater to. In 1995, Marriott International stepped in and purchased 49 percent interest in Ritz-Carlton. Three years later, that interest was increased to 99 percent.

According to Mr. Lagerwey, it was then when modern management techniques were introduced. The service would continue to be of an impeccable nature, but the way in which this level would be reached was to be modernised dramatically.

Perhaps good to realise that most of these hotel companies are actually management companies which specialise in managing and operating a hotel. The bricks and mortars are usually owned by some private investors.

So with the change in ownership, there were some benefits from economies of scale, but the most important change came with the introduction of the Ritz Carlton Basics (TM). Behind these basics, there is an all encompassing plan which covers the seemingly most insignificant details of interaction between hotel personnel and guests. For instance, basic no. 16 stipulates that hotel guests should never be given mere directions but should be escorted to the requested area of the hotel.

From clothing and grooming to the positive use of eye contact, all are covered in the 20 basics. And since the Ritz is a US based company, the rigour and





REVIEW



enthusiasm to which these Basics are adhered to is both intimidating as well as refreshing to European (or perhaps Dutch) ears.

The Ritz' motto is "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen". The motto reflects the culture which the Ritz Carlton seeks to create. A culture whereby a premium is placed on mutual respect and courtesy, both in internal as well as external contact. The internal respect is safeguarded by employee empowerment programmes, recognition awards etc. A good example is that management sets out straightforward goals but does not prescribe how these goals should be achieved. The most important aspect of every employee's function is customer satisfaction. As it can not be determined in advance what a business traveller from Japan, a Dutch football star, a moody Italian opera singer or a American self-made millionaire would like to have for breakfast, it is left to the employee's own discretion how to deal with requests from guests. A budget for complying with the guest's wishes is set, but such is merely to avoid that hotel staff go completely overboard in making the stay a pleasant one. Stories of hotel personnel flying half way across the world to return a cell phone are noted to illustrate the point.



So, the empowerment of the employees works both ways. The employees get involved in the day-to-day management of the hotel, or at least that part of the hotel operations which affects their jobs. They are briefed on the financial situation of the hotel, the strategy and are encouraged to share suggestions and alternatives. The idea is that once the personnel feels involved with the hotel business, it will increase their commitment and will positively affect their attitude towards hotel guests. This line of reasoning is not new. When asked to reveal the secret of Virgin's success, Richard Branson once quipped that he did not consider the customer to be king but Virgin's employees to be the most important.



The American angle comes into play when all the aspects considered important to the hotel business are neatly condensed into a summary of basics, mottos, slogans and visions. The European mind would wonder how to apply such shorthand guidelines to complex everyday situations. But from the underlying philosophy it is clear that the summary should merely serve as a reminder of the hotel's deeply rooted conviction to provide the best service possible to all parties involved. Fashion may have changed over the years, nobody tries to look like Gary Cooper any more, but it is good to see that, in a time where, trends follow each other at an ever increasing pace, there are still businesses around which focus on one thing; Quality. 🇳🇱