



Being Everything to Everyone:

How a major demographic shift is changing the face of the hotel industry

It has been estimated by the Travel Industry Association (TIA) that women account for 43 percent of business travelers. They also tend to be well-heeled consumers with higher travel expectations than men. The average female business traveler is a baby boomer with a bachelor's degree, earns up to \$75,000 and belongs to one or two frequent hotel guest programs, according to a survey conducted by New York University in 2006.

Vista Host, Inc., a Houston, Texas-based hotel management company serving owners of Hampton Inn & Suites and Homewood Suites by Hilton, Courtyard and TownePlace Suites by Marriott and a number of other hotel brands, understands the value of identifying the needs and wants of all business travelers but is looking to target women.

"Our company has in-depth experience in managing limited-feature hotels, midscale full-service hotels, convention hotels and resorts," says Michael Harrell, CEO of Vista Host, Inc. "The markets are very competitive and we're always seeking another point of difference as to why a traveler would choose us over our competitors."

The company's current plan for growth includes recognizing the potential of extended stay hotels as well as implementing modern features such as raised beds, flat screen televisions complete with entertainment centers and introducing all female floors at select hotels.

Harrell says that the company is doing more new development deals now than they have in the last 30 years.

"The opportunities are found in the markets we operate in," he says. "We find that the markets are doing well but there is a need for a different concept hotel. It could be a suite hotel, an extended stay hotel or a new hotel in a submarket that has been developed in one of our current markets. It could also be a redevelopment in an area where we can build hotels and receive substantial tax incentives."

ENHANCING GUEST SERVICES

Finding opportunities is only part of the company's strategy—it also involves recognizing new and better ways to provide service and convenience to guests that stay at their hotels.

Who better to implement innovations than Vista Host considering the company has received numerous awards of excellence including Management Company of the Year by Hampton Inns and the Roy E. Winegardner Award of Excellence for guest satisfaction and operations performance. The company was also recognized for having one of the twenty best hotels by Holiday Inn Worldwide.

The difference between Vista Host and other companies in the same markets is that it was founded by operators and not financiers.

"Our approach to management is very hands on. I was a manager for a number of years and grew up in the business. I expect our managers to be at the hotels or in the field and not sitting around in the office," says Harrell.

Harrell believes that the company's strength comes from an unwavering focus in four primary areas: commitment to guest service and satisfaction, general manager involvement and deep understanding of the sales efforts, a comprehensive training program for its sales staff and addressing maximum efficiency in labor and operational costs.

WOMEN-FRIENDLY

Vista Host's interest in accommodating female travelers is understandable. TIA estimates that 32 million single American women traveled at least once last year, and about 3 in 10 traveled five times or more. Almost 40 percent of women over the age of 35 don't have a built-in travel partner. Out of the 34.8 million travelers who traveled alone in the past three years, 47 percent are female. Women also make up 52 percent of adventure travelers.

"In this market, 40 to 50 percent of our business travelers are women. We felt that an all female floor would give us an added benefit for the female travelers to select us over our competitors," says Harrell.

The concept of all female hotel floors and women-friendly accommodations has primarily been popular in Europe and Asia. One of the first hotels to experiment with an all female floor was the Four Seasons Hotel in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Vista Host is testing the waters of the first female floor at its Hampton Inn & Suites in downtown Albany, New York.

"The Hampton Inn in downtown Albany is devoting an entire floor to female guests. It's one of a small number of hotels in the country to offer such an option," says Harrell.

The Hampton Inn provides an all female floor that is similar to a concierge floor because only the guests can take the elevator to that floor. According to Harrell, women staying on the floor receive special amenities and services that are tailored to women from Sunday to Thursday. Male guests are only allowed on the floor Fridays and Saturdays. Women pay a \$20 premium for the room.

The female-only floors aim to provide guests with a rock star experience only available at upscale hotels.

The amenities package includes a hospitality display featuring magazines, baked goods, and gourmet coffees and teas. All 19 rooms have been stocked with skin moisturizers, hand creams, extra-soft socks, a half hour session in a massage chair, a sauna, a steam room and an electronic key that provides exclusive access to the floor. In some hotels, there are also women-only fitness centers.

"The rooms offer female guests a greater sense of privacy and the opportunity to meet other professionals who are traveling," says Harrell.

The interest in marketing to women in the hospitality industry has always been on the mind of hoteliers. Until recently, hotels provided spas and salons that were typically geared at women. But as women entered into the business world, it became clear to hotel owners and operators that women worried less about price than men for the right amenities and services. Fear of losing business to the growing boutique hotel segment is really what made the industry stand up and take notice of female travelers.

"Business travelers are younger, and more young women are traveling than ever before," says Harrell.

"Convenience and destination still appeal to both men and women who travel on business and we try to focus our brands on those principles. This industry is reinventing itself to meet changing traveler expectations, and all female floors are increasingly becoming a priority."

Harrell says that the highest concern of female travelers is security.

Women are finding more hotels offering to have hotel staff escort them to their rooms late at night or assign them rooms near elevators, shortening their walk down remote hallways. Front desk staff uses discretion in telling incoming guests their room numbers and in most cases, unless authorized by the guest, they will not divulge this information to anyone who asks.

Aesthetic features include the addition of curved shower rods and better lighting. Hotels are also installing bathroom counters that are conducive to makeup application. A new practice is the introduction of branded toiletries, Hilton hotels offer Crabtree & Evelyn products and Marriott and Renaissance hotels offer Bath & Body Works aromatherapy products.

Vista Host operates 24 select-service hotels and they have 10 new hotels in the pipeline. They have four projects in Pittsburgh, three projects in Austin, and just opened the first new ground-up Courtyard with the new "lifestyle" lobby.

INTRODUCING THE "PERFECT MIX" LOBBY

The lifestyle lobby, according to Harrell, is creating an environment where guests can come down from their rooms and conduct meetings with other traveling associates in a comfortable environment.

"A lifestyle lobby is a place where the business person can grab a bite to eat or have a drink with his or her associates," he explains. "The first one that Marriott built was in Washington, D.C., which was a renovation. We have done similar upgraded lobby areas that Hilton coined a 'perfect mix' lobby at the Hampton Inn in both Austin and Pittsburgh. These new lobbies speak more to today's business travelers that are always glued to their computers and hotel rooms. They are able to work in an area that has more of a social component and activity than simply sitting in their hotel rooms."

There are a number of priorities on Harrell's agenda and they all include continuing the company's reputation for superior service and products.

"We want to continue to be the best operators in the business, and we would also like to build more new and unique hotels," he says. 🌈

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| | <p>Harrell Contracting Group proudly announces the completion of the Courtyard Marriott in Jackson TN, built for Vista Host. This hotel marks the 56th Marriott brand hotel built by HCG and is the first in the country to feature the newly designed interior which will be the new standard for Courtyard Marriott hotels.</p> |
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