

The CONDO HOTEL LIFESTYLE...A Return to the Café Society

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During a recent afternoon visit to a New York Museum, I was inspired by the Dorothy Draper exhibition which showcased her High Style and “The Draper Touch”. One of the original tastemakers of Manhattan society in the 1930’s, this legendary interior decorator (not designers as they are now referred to), encouraged the movement to showcase legendary hotels as the best residential addresses for the wealthy.

While we continue to observe the condo hotel scene explosion, it is important to note this “new lifestyle” was famous decades ago, when it was quite fashionable for privileged clientele to reside in hotels. During my early hotel career at The Drake in Chicago, our friendly term was “permanent residents”.

Today, I envision a myriad of opportunities for the hotel companies operating mixed-use properties to truly analyze the rebirth of this business paradigm and the challenges associated with pleasing demanding owners versus hotel guests. Over the past fifteen years, I have consulted on projects with ownership components along with high repeat guest ratios, many who also perceive themselves as owners. Delivering flawless service levels into daily operations, especially with a shortage of human capital, can be a challenge for owners and managers in today’s environment.

While we are continually exposed to expanding wealth in the US, primarily from baby boomers with strong entitlement issues willing to pay for luxury goods and services with huge disposable incomes, convenience and seamless services are a necessary part of the equation. Though many guests will not be a direct purchaser of your real estate, they may still desire to be treated as owners. To nurture such relationships and insure they incur repeat and extended stays, serious thought should be given to “owner privileges”, keeping in mind such guests can perhaps eventually graduate to become a future owner. Real estate acquisitions are the new cocktail chatter, so never under-estimate bragging rights of owners and potential guest ambassadors.

Securing spa treatment appointments prior to arrival is one thing, however, be assured their treatment of choice is performed by their preferred therapist. Dinner reservations should be secured at their preferred time and designated table with their signature cocktail and favorite wine chilled. Honor bars can be customized with specific items, along with the newspapers and magazines they read and the music they listen to. The more customized the services, the better to instill a feeling of ownership, or at least a comfortable level of being “a regular”.

It’s common today for people to have dual residences and in many cases, ownership in condo hotels, destination clubs or fractionals. There is an opportunity to create a non-commercial environment once inside the property, thereby down-playing your brand with logos on each possible item. Take a more personalized approach, if not from the owners perspective...than perhaps liken the stay to visiting the residence of a wealthy friend who happens to be out of town.

The guest experience should start at the reservation inception, though at this level the interface primarily is with the personal assistant, travel agent, lifestyle management company or their family office. Inquire as to estimated time of arrival, how they will arrive, if transportation is required, personalized

stationary and cards, fresh flowers, packing/unpacking services, laundry, shoe-shines, tailoring, pet-sitting are the norm. With the current wave of CRM concierge technology, such precise customer profiles could mirror data maintained while “owners are in residence”.

A revival of sophisticated urban and resort living plays well into the condo hotel segment. Our mobile society and social commitments coupled with a renewed interest in an enriched active, cultural lifestyle can be easily orchestrated through a hotel’s butler and concierge services, as is room service or private dining salons with personal wine storage bins.

If handled appropriately, only the spoken word would distinguish the nuances between owner and guest. “Welcome Home” versus “Welcome Back”.

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