

RESORT MANAGEMENT:

Delivering on the Promise

—by Sharon B. Drechsler, RRP

Timeshare resort managers may seem driven to provide excellent hospitality because they serve owners rather than transient guests. They are a different breed altogether, often being more dedicated, work-driven, and results-oriented than anyone else in this or perhaps any other industry. All with one goal: to give their customers a superior vacation experience.

So, while consumer-centric sales may be the buzz word among ARDA members these days, we might just as readily talk about “consumer-centric management”.

A History of Heroes

Early developers of timeshare created a rosy concept: sell the same condo unit 52 times! Guess who made that concept really work? That’s right, it was the managers who in the early days tracked inventory on a giant-sized booking board, handled annual maintenance fees with 3x5 cards, and lobbied their contacts at an exchange company on behalf of owners.

Scott MacGregor, RRP, who is now chief financial officer for InnSeason Resorts, in Hyannis, Massachusetts, reminisced, “In 1984, I took a job at the front desk of the Palm Springs Tennis Club, a classic resort from the 1930’s that had been redeveloped as a timeshare by Watt Industries. I found the complexity and novelty of the product and the interaction with sales and operations teams and customers very exciting. Woody Cary ran all of Watt’s resorts, as Tricom was at that time the property management arm of Watt. The first

Timeshare’s “Treasures”

ARDA resorts around the country do a great job all the time to provide outstanding experiences for travelers. What are some unique “wow!” features that they offer that bring owners/guests back every year—no matter what the state of the economy? Here are just a few that we found...if you come across more, e-mail them to kmullan@arda.org to highlight at a later time!

> Berkley Group *Massanutten Resort*



The indoor building features a wood-framed pyramid covered with an innovative Texlon foil material to allow sunlight in and offer a great view of the Shenandoah Valley and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The indoor park is 42,000 sq. ft., featuring eight

indoor water slides, a multi-level aquatic fortress, an adventure river, and Virginia’s first and largest FlowRider® (a simulated surf machine with 50,000 gallons of water). The outdoor park is 88,000 sq. ft. including a wave pool, multi-lane mat racer, and activity pool, as well as two restaurants and a surf shop.

time I saw Woody, he had his pants and shirt sleeves rolled up and was working in the flower beds with the landscapers. I didn't know who he was at the time. When I came in the next morning to start the a.m. shift, Woody was finishing up some work with the auditor—he had worked through the day and night. 'Who's that?' I asked an associate, who responded, 'That's the president of the company we work for.'

"Woody's willingness to work alongside anyone in any role, his vision for making all the moving parts work together to deliver an exceptional experience to the customers and team members, his absolute integrity, and that amazing dedication has inspired me for 25 years."

SPM Resorts President and COO Bill Young also mentions the vital role played by early pioneers and mentors. "While I was in the hotel business, I never thought that I would ever get into the timeshare industry just based on the negative things said about this business. However, Terry Collier [founder and chairman of SPM Resorts] truly had an impact on my career. He hired me as president and shared with me the simple things like, 'Let's manage the business and not allow the business to manage us. Always think outside of the box. Let's make sure that we obtain the unshakeable facts. You should communicate on a regular basis with your boards. Always make your team feel that they are a part of the big picture.'"

Axioms such as these are deceptively simple; actually putting them into practice takes management to the next level.

Best Practices

You might say that management is more than a science; it's more of an intuitive approach. What are some best practices that have developed over the years? What are some of the best solutions to common challenges?

MacGregor says: "Best practices in the timeshare business are a combination of specific and general expertise. Specific competencies include things like resort finance, inventory management, billing and collection practices, etc. General competencies are things we adapt from other industries like processing customer feedback to enhance marketing efficiencies and satisfaction ratings, deploying technology in rooms and common areas as in traditional hospitality, and employing building materials and unit furnishings that are energy efficient and commercially serviceable."

Young warns against relying on a cookie-cutter approach to resort management. "I think 'best practices' should be determined by reviewing what the needs of each resort are, creating the best practice for achieving them and realizing that, while the practice may transfer from one resort to another, they need to be reviewed by each one."

This one-by-one approach brings the best results, as well as greater job satisfaction. "A great resort manager takes exceptional pride in delivering a product and experience that wows the guests and owners," says MacGregor. "They think of the resort as their home and treat the guests as friends and family who have come to stay overnight."

> Breckenridge Grand Vacations



The town of Breckenridge is a treasure in itself, with its rich history of Gold Rush mining and its popular skiing appeal (this past season, it was the most popular destination, with a record 1,392,242 skier visits). The *Grand Lodge on Peak 7*, which is currently

under construction, will be Breckenridge's first eco-friendly timeshare resort. Building materials will be brought in from within a 500-mile radius whenever possible. The developers also chose to use a "scientific building envelope," a sophisticated building science to create a more energy-efficient building with a super-insulated roof and high efficiency wall sheathing system.

Once the new resort is complete, the 114 residences will feature many energy-conserving elements. Linens will be made from bamboo and only green paper products will be used. Appliances feature recycled stainless steel, toilets and showers are low flow, and individual heating controls in each residence are "eco-mode" to increase efficiency. The grounds will be equipped with moisture sensors for snow melt, and the maintenance department will plow and shovel snow instead of using a chemical snow melt product. The water features (swimming pools, indoor and outdoor hot tubs, a waterslide, and a grotto) will employ a salt-chlorination system.

> Bluegreen Corporation *Shenandoah Crossing™*



This new resort in Gordonsville, VA, features RV pads and yurts for enhanced outdoor experience vacationing. The yurt (an oversized strong and weather-tight tent with a circular structure that consists of durable fabric, a strong

wooden frame, and hardwood floors and decks) is available in two accommodation styles—open and private, both fully insulated and interiorly decorated and furnished. This resort adventure also offers three-bedroom cabins, one-bedroom suites, and three styles of RV pads (the Deluxe, the Elite, and the Presidential).

Owners also may drive their own RVs to the Neighborhood (located just north of the existing Shenandoah resort). The Deluxe RV pads are back-in units, while the Elite RV pads are pull-throughs. All sites include full patios, grills, fire rings, and a multi-use additional parking/play area. This RV site also offers a variety of activities with the American Revolution theme, such as family/neighborhood challenge nights with fife and drum competitions and treasure/scavenger hunts, musket ball, ghost tours, and the Trading Pavilion, known as Friendship Square.



So then it is pride in a job well done that drives good managers. Young observes that money and love of people are not the main motivators for managers—although, he adds, he’s never met a good manager who didn’t enjoy owners and fellow team members. It is more about the promise of accomplishment.

“I think the secret in knowing what makes a resort manager tick can be found by asking them what their happiest or most rewarding experience has been,” he says. “The great managers will always, and I mean always, have one of three answers:

- An experience with a resort that was in a state of disarray, and s/he turned it around to the point where the owners loved the property and owners were having a great vacation experience.
- When s/he was able to fix a problem or assist an owner beyond the ordinary (interestingly in these cases, the manager never seems to realize that they have gone above and beyond what is expected of them—they just feel they did the right thing).
- When s/he persevered through a significant challenge from an outside source such as a hurricane, fire, or some other natural disaster.”

This attitude and aptitude is hard to capture in an operations manual or to teach in a sterile environment. It is part of a manager’s inherent makeup, tempered by learning from mentors.

Owner/Member-Centric Service

With resort management, it’s a given that it’s all about service—the good old-fashioned type of service. Technology may broaden managers’ capabilities, and outsourcing portions of the hands-on duties, such as housekeeping or accounting, may help save on manpower. But will management as a discipline change within the next few years or even the next few decades? How can these professionals ensure consistently high levels of service?

MacGregor looks at ARDA’s role in providing a knowledge base and platform for ongoing study. “There are so many resources available to keep up with things happening in the industry, especially through ARDA,” he points out. “Equally as important is information about trends external to our industry that are likely to have an impact on us, like energy and travel costs, consumer behaviors and expectations, and building materials.”

Young agrees that involvement in ARDA is important. “And what I think also keeps us up-to-date is listening to our owners, especially the boards of directors of the resorts we manage.”

Both agree that with today’s evolving product, the resort manager of a project is challenged to keep up with varying usage plans and unit types (particularly when the resort has added a variety of phases). Often, they may be tasked with the duty of creating or purchasing technology to handle reservations and maintenance fees. Managers of aging properties in particular may need to keep track of owners who originally purchased a fixed week in a fixed unit in the ‘80s and others who bought floating time in the ‘90s, while newer owners are purchasing points in a right-to-use structure. How then can managers keep their focus on delivering great service to the owner and at the same time keep all the planets in orbit?

> ResortCom International

Bella Sirena (Puerto Penasco/Rocky Point, Mexico)



Bella Sirena beachfront community rises from the gold sands on the north shore of the Sea of Cortez, featuring dramatic “desert-by-the-sea” beauty. This is one of the newest luxury resorts offering fractional ownership in Puerto Penasco, Mexico, also known

as Rocky Point. The community is connected by hand-laid stone streets and features old-world architecture villas, inspired by Old Mexico and Tuscan cultures. Each residence offers panoramic views—a star selling attraction. These villas are just a few steps from the sea and are adorned with handcrafted cupolas for a private escape. The resort offers many amenities: infinity pools, spa, 14 acres of spacious living in lush Mediterranean gardens along hand laid pathways, and a putting green. The area offers miles of sandy beaches and an average of 340 days of sunshine each year.

> Raintree Resorts

Teton Club



With 37 luxurious condominiums, The Teton Club is Jackson Hole’s premier private residence club. It personifies the west in all its glory and grandeur and is perfectly located at the base of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort. In 2003, a program

was initiated, where a \$2 per night fee per condo for each Teton Club member and guest is collected and donated to the Jackson Hole Land Trust (JHLT). The JHLT is a non-profit organization, whose purpose is to preserve open space and the scenic, ranching, and wildlife values of Jackson Hole by protecting the land in perpetuity. To date, more than \$66,000 has been donated. In 2006, The Teton Club instituted the first in-residence recycling program in Jackson Hole to help preserve the area’s sustainability. Last year, The Teton Club implemented an energy-saving program by replacing all lighting with low energy, long-lasting fluorescent bulbs.

“Clearly, resort managers must keep abreast of the products and services employed by their owners and support those that provide their owners with the greatest flexibilities and values, while learning to identify those that may not work in the owners’ best interests,” adds MacGregor. “They need to be experts in technology, both as management tools and information sources. Most importantly, they must remain close to their customers, interacting with them directly to understand how they’re using their products, looking for trends that may indicate problems or opportunities, and educating them about issues affecting their timeshare ownership. Technology is a great enabler of closer ties to our owners, with blogs, on-line forums and direct feedback as tremendous communication channels—but eye-to-eye contact with them at the front desk, informational meetings, and activities remains the manager’s best and favorite tool for maintaining that personal contact.”

“Owners today are different in lots of ways,” continues MacGregor. “Just like the managers who have been in the business for many years, many of them have accumulated years of timeshare experience and know how things can and should work. New owners can tap into a wealth of knowledge about product options and use that knowledge to shop for the best products, companies, and prices. One thing that hasn’t changed is that when they buy a timeshare, they’re buying a vacation and not a job, so they often end up on a board for one of two reasons: they have valuable professional or social experience or they aren’t satisfied with the quality, value, or service they’re currently receiving. You really want to have board members in the first and not the second category.”

Says Young, “I think individuals who buy timeshare today are doing so for pretty much the same reason they always have: it provides a better vacation experience at a reasonable price and they feel they have some control over their vacation options.

“The mix of members on the board is different from resort to resort and generally reflects the makeup of the resort ownership—or for that matter, any community. We have boards with mature members and younger members, those with Ph.D.s and those who did not finish high school. All of these people regardless their age, wealth, education, or experience with timeshares have something to offer. What we believe is uniform among board members is their care for and about their resorts. That is the character of the members of the board.”

Conclusion

While the very nature of product has evolved as the industry has continued to change and mature, the best managers take great pains to acquire ongoing education, learn the newest technology, and remain in touch with their peers. As MacGregor observes, “Staying current is not a passive thing: It requires curiosity and effort.”

A manager’s responsibilities and headaches may vary from one resort to another in the case of those managing more than one site, but in every instance, the focus on the customer remains at the center. Given the results- and people-oriented nature of managers in this industry, it is to be expected that our owners can expect great vacations for many years to come. **D**

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> Wyndham Vacation Ownership



WVO has several treasures to offer today’s traveler. The recently opened *WorldMark West Yellowstone* is the only major brand vacation ownership resort in town and is located less than a mile from the west entrance of Yellowstone National Park.

Wyndham Nashville, a Wyndham Vacation Resort, hosts live entertainment at least three times a week, including Grand Ole Opry star T. Graham Brown. For music and entertainment lovers who celebrate history, *WorldMark The Camlin* in Seattle, WA, was formerly The Camlin Hotel where legendary artists such as Frank Sinatra performed in the rooftop Cloud Room restaurant and bar. Tom Hanks, Miles Davis, Elvis Costello, Foo Fighters guitarist/vocalist Dave Grohl, and the “Godfather of Soul” James Brown all either stayed at The Camlin or visited its legendary Cloud Room. *Wyndham Bonnet Creek Resort* is the only non-Disney vacation ownership property located on the grounds of Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, FL.

