

Hotel Business[®]

Industry Insider Q&A with Chris Guimbellot

By Gregg Wallis January/February 2021 issue



Chris Guimbellot
President & CEO

When Chris Guimbellot was named president/CEO of Hospitality International, he returned to a company he first joined in 2000, starting in the reservations department before moving on to director of marketing and, eventually, VP of operations. In 2010, he left to purchase a digital marketing agency in New York, and in 2014, he joined the company's board of directors.

Hotel Business spoke to Guimbellot about rejoining the company and the launch of hihotels by Hospitality International as its renamed umbrella for Red Carpet Inn, Scottish Inns, Master Hosts Inns, Downtowner Inns and Passport Inn.

You recently re-joined Hospitality International as president/CEO. What do you hope to accomplish?

As we are a privately held company, I don't have to worry about short-term stock price fluctuations, nor do I have institutions trying to dictate the direction we take this company. My focus is on building long-term value of the company, which comes through growth, as well as building relationships with our franchisees.

I assumed the role of president/CEO in September, but have been working for three years to lay the groundwork for where we are now. Over that time, we have built an incredible team consisting of individuals who have already had a hand in building the kind of company I envision. For the first time, we are perfectly positioned for growth and have an aggressive plan to make that happen.

What are some initiatives you'd like to implement?

With all the consolidation in the industry, I think select-service hotels are not receiving the same level of support that they have in the past, which is the original value proposition of joining a brand in the first place. While other brands have removed those touchpoints, we firmly believe that we are able to capitalize on the vacuum left by the consolidation.

Our Assurance & Marketing Program (AMP) was established to provide one-on-one marketing and reservation assistance tailored to each franchisee and market. The program has been wildly successful. My plan is to work directly with franchisees and our staff to discover more ways to assist in growing revenue at each of our hotels and expand the reach of AMP.

In addition to increasing services to our franchisees, we will work aggressively to expand the footprint of the brand through what I call smart growth. Instead of focusing on the sheer number of hotels in the system, we are focusing more on hotels that are in good locations, are high quality, and have ownership that has a desire to work together to achieve success for both their property and their franchise system. I believe this smart growth is the key to increasing the value of the system in the long term.

Finally, we have recently begun a more active promotional campaign geared toward our goal of smart growth. We are actively reaching out to hotel owners using an omnichannel strategy to extend our message of partnership and personalized assistance. When hotel owners are evaluating their options, we aim to be top of mind when it comes to the service for value proposition. It's a great message that we want potential partners to know about.

The company recently announced hihotels by Hospitality International as its renamed umbrella brand. Tell us about it.

We realized that while the traveling public is familiar with our various brands, they didn't seem to know that the five brands were part of one family. If we can change that perception, we open our customer base up to our entire system of hotels. We wanted to better leverage the cross-promotion strategy that other hotel systems have successfully implemented.

From a branding standpoint, hihotels by Hospitality International makes a lot of sense. Not only does it keep with our legacy, but also denotes a message of friendliness and warmth to the guest. With the introduction of stayhihotels.com, we put into place the final piece of the consumer branding effort.

With the successful rebranding now complete, we are going to launch consumer marketing efforts at scale to vastly increase brand awareness and, in the end, help put heads in the beds of our hotels. From a quality standpoint, our system is the best it's ever been and we can't wait to inform the traveling public.

2020 was obviously a tough year for the hotel industry. How did the company fare during that period?

While many of our hotels did struggle, I think it's accurate to say that, overall, hihotels by Hospitality International and our franchisees have managed quite well for a few reasons: 1) We don't typically rely on business and group travel, which has obviously taken a big hit. 2) Construction, on the other hand, has remained strong and our hotels have benefited from that trend. 3) Another X-factor that we didn't anticipate was that exterior corridors started to seem safer to guests from a social distancing standpoint. Since many of our hotels are exterior corridor, they really benefitted from that trend. 4) Finally, in a time of financial uncertainty, select-service brands offer a very good value proposition for guests.

Like many others, we used this time to take a step back and reflect on the things that matter and how we could help our owners. What we uncovered is that they needed one-on-one support and guidance from us. While some other brands cut services, I am proud to say that not only did we not cut franchisee-facing services, we substantially increased our direct contact and one-on-one support. This has manifested in better operations at the individual hotels, as well as better relationships with our owners.

In terms of development of the system, we finished 2020 better than expected. Even though there is a lot of uncertainty in the industry, and hotels are reluctant to make wholesale changes right now, we added more properties in the fourth quarter of 2020 than in Q4 2019. To me, this signifies that our message of support and partnership is resonating, which makes our future very exciting.

What does the near future look like for the company?

Using the fourth quarter as a springboard, we will continue to target hotels and markets where we can find partners interested in mutual growth.

Adding in more value through AMP will only increase the benefits to our franchisees and help them fully recover from the events of 2020.

The changes we are making are already paying dividends, as we've seen an uptick in referrals from existing franchisees. I consider that the highest form of flattery.

