

# LODGING

## Checking In: Chris Guimbellot Returns to Hospitality International to Lead Amid Turbulent Times

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Chris Guimbellot  
President & CEO

Chris Guimbellot started his career with Hospitality International and rejoined the company in 2020 as president and CEO. Guimbellot's interest in hospitality goes back to when he was a child exploring his family's hotel and when he took his first job bussing tables in the property's restaurant. Now, as president and CEO, Guimbellot discusses with *LODGING* Hospitality International's future plans and biggest priorities for 2021.

**It's an interesting time for Hospitality International, with the new brand identity that was announced last summer. What's to come for 2021, and what are some of your biggest priorities and initiatives?**

COVID has hammered this industry, but we don't have as many issues as some of the other players. We are in a good situation because what hasn't stopped is transportation and construction; in fact, they've increased. We are economy hotels in many secondary markets with a lot of drive-to properties and construction in process. But just like everyone else, we have hotels that are struggling. We had hotels close due to mandates, but we're in a decent position compared to some of the other brands. It's an interesting time because we want to pursue new opportunities and goals, but COVID is priority one.

Looking forward to 2021, we have two all-encompassing goals. First, we want to build business for our hotels and help them get more money back in their pocket through redesigning the guest program. Second, we want to grow just like everyone else. We want partnerships with hotels that want to work with us and that we want to work with. We want to grow smart.

**What are you looking at in terms of growth in 2021?**

I absolutely believe that we can grow 15 percent in the number of properties in our system in 2021. In addition, we are going to be doing more outreach from both the advertising side and the social media side for more exposure. We think that if we can provide a level of service to our existing hotels and demonstrate that level of service to our prospects, they'll sign and come work with us.

**What sets Hospitality International brands apart for franchisees, and what will you be focusing on for guests?**

For franchisees, we have our assurance marketing program. There are companies much larger than us that don't provide any sort of onsite marketing services to their hotels near our price point. Second, what sets us apart is our incredible team. With COVID, there were massive layoffs in the industry; we didn't do that. We also increased touchpoints with our franchisees, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. COVID created new paradigms that simply didn't exist before. With that, we talked to our team members as much as possible on the phone. Keeping in touch with franchisees has been top-of-mind, and the response has been great.

For guests, we're expanding our presence and moving West. In addition, we've been working hard on increasing the quality of our hotels, both that we allow into the system and that are current franchisees. We're keenly aware of the cost-consciousness of our franchisees and partners. Our quality is getting better and that is going to resonate from the guest standpoint.

**Do you think the paradigm created by COVID-19 is going to impact your strategy permanently?**

The relationships we have with our franchisees have already started to nurture new referrals. We are finding the majority of our sales are simply coming from referrals, and—to me—that speaks volumes. We are doing virtual pre-inspections when new properties come on. The sales are more tough because we can't simply go visit properties. Some of the changes with our franchisees are going to stick.

**What do you love most about the hospitality industry?**

It's all about people. I mentioned that we put together a great team, and I love working with my work family. I stay on calls a bit longer than I should to ask about family and laugh. You don't always get that communication in other fields. It's super fulfilling for me and, quite honestly, I'm just humbled to be part of it.

