

## One on One

# Hospitality International's Chris Guimbellot

by Jennifer Glatt  
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While he was still pursuing his bachelor's degree in marketing from Loyola University New Orleans, Chris Guimbellot was stamping property codes on credit card applications for Hospitality International. In his ascent to the top spot of the company, he worked in "every department of the company," took a 10-year detour, then returned to HI "with fresh ideas and a new outlook," ready to use his marketing skills and acquired business acumen for the benefit of the company that launched his career.

### A STEADY CLIMB

"I got my start in the industry because my father owned a hotel in Biloxi, Miss.," Guimbellot recalled. "When I was a little kid, he would put me behind the desk, but his general manager always ran me off. They finally agreed to allow me to bus tables in the restaurant. I was being paid a dollar an hour; that was all the money in the world."

Following his college graduation, he went to work full-time for HI as a special projects coordinator. Initially responsible for the reservation reporting function as well as reporting key metrics to the board of directors, Guimbellot designed and built a MS SQL database to unify data from disparate sources for analysis. He then moved to the director of marketing role, utilizing technology to increase call conversion rates and strategic partnerships to outsource reservations processing, all the while with an eye toward increasing revenue and decreasing costs. He served for six years as HI's director of technology and e-commerce, then took the helm as vice-president in 2009—but at just less than a year, his tenure was short-lived. Guimbellot then took the role of owner and president of full-service internet marketing firm Hotel Internet Strategies.



Chris Guimbellot

"It was during that time that I experienced a lot of professional growth," he said. "I was certainly exposed to new things and ways of doing business. That time of my life prepared me for the role I would eventually take over in 2020." He became president and CEO of Hospitality International that year.

### A CLEAR VISION

The partnership element of Guimbellot's numerous roles in the hospitality industry make him uniquely qualified to lead this brand.

"In our company, we have combined the sales and support roles. Our regional franchise development director who builds a relationship with a hotel owner during the sales process is the same person the franchisee turns to for support and guidance once their property is online. I believe the dual role contributes to sourcing quality properties that we can effectively serve. Not only that, but it allows for continuity of the relationship between the franchisee and the company."

When determining which properties are a good fit for the HI portfolio, Guimbellot said that the company believes in a strategy of "smart growth." Simply put, he said, "we're looking for high-quality properties in good markets and solid locations that can benefit from our assistance. We know that by focusing on those quality properties in good locations, we will continue to build a strong company and strong brands."

Guimbellot recognizes that by focusing on the relationship with franchisees, strong bonds are built, as well. One thing he finds unique about HI's system is the amount of support the franchisees receive.

“Many companies have moved to a virtual inspection model due to Covid to save on cost. As a result, their service to franchisees diminished. We’ve remained very high-touch with in-person visits and are committed to offering more and more resources to our hotel owners.”

In keeping with the partnership approach, Guimbellot noted that he is excited about HI’s newly launched Franchisee Advisory Council, which consists of five franchisees, a vendor and Guimbellot himself. “During quarterly calls, we receive ideas and feedback directly from our members that we can implement, and which benefit the entire franchise system. Our franchisees have an active voice on how we run our system.”

In the fourth quarter this year, he said HI will be launching a portal for franchisees “that will educate them on topics such as human trafficking and address everything from front desk operations to maintenance issues. The intent is to provide our franchisees with the very best training at no cost to them.”

Oftentimes people who have grown up around water share how impactful the element can be. Guimbellot’s business approach, too, is inspired by his formative years near the Crescent City.

“When I was growing up, my stepfather was a pilot on the Mississippi River. He was responsible for navigating those giant ships that come up the river to New Orleans. I was lucky enough to take several trips with him. As you are coming into New Orleans, the Algiers bend is a large bend in the river that can pose a significant hazard to those ships. He taught me that to navigate that big turn safely requires two things: first, you have to have a clear vision about where you want to end up, and second, small efforts accumulate. Those lessons have stuck with me to this day.

“As we operate the company, we have a clear vision about where we want to end up, and that is to have a strong franchise system centered around the success of our franchisees. When it comes to the second lesson, today, sometimes the big corporate moves are the ones that get the most notoriety. For us, though, we know that to achieve our vision, it takes a series of small efforts, all geared toward our franchisees. Just as on the ship, those small efforts accumulate, which will help guide us toward our vision.”

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