

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

A Hotel's Secret: Treat the Guests Like Guests



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Alan J. Fuerstman

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LUXURY hotels vie for bragging rights to the best amenities and the most awards, hoping that these assure repeat visits, higher occupancy rates and increased room rates. But top hoteliers contend that the real secret to success is providing the best "guest experience."

That often translates to how a staff member caters to a guest's needs, which, in turn, depends on how well the staff member is trained.

Training and staff development are increasingly important not just to make guests happy, however. Keeping staff members happy and loyal has become a concern in an industry where turnover rates are about 50 percent for nonmanagement positions and 25 percent for management - among the highest of any industry, according to J. Bruce Tracey, associate professor of management at the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell.

Alan J. Fuerstman, the chief executive of Montage Hotels and Resorts, could be one of those bragging hoteliers. Montage Laguna Beach, the company's flagship property, has won a variety of awards and accolades since opening in 2003 in Southern California. Mr. Fuerstman was named the 2007 Resort Executive of the Year by hospitality industry leaders at the 2008 Resort Management Conference last spring.

In an interview, Mr. Fuerstman emphasized staff training and retention, a subject that especially interests him as he prepares to open a new Montage in Beverly Hills in November. Q. When you roll out a brand based on the success of one property, how do you make sure that what was unique and distinctive with one doesn't become a cookie cutter by the third or fourth?

A. You're right to be concerned. And while we are proud of our Laguna Beach property's Craftsman architecture, the local original plein-air art we showcase, the tranquil setting perched

above the Pacific Ocean, even our green-conscious sustainability program, the most important thing we'll export around the world is the Montage culture of gracious but humble service. It's those emotional connections between guests and staff and the depth of this culture that unify the Montage brand.

Q. Can you really teach "grace and humility?"

A. Not only do we teach it, but we also reinforce and reward it. The teaching starts with modeling. We show staff the kind of kindness, support and respect we hope they show guests.

Q. Can you give any specific examples?

A. We are very big on offering all employees extracurricular educational opportunities that can be applied in or out of our hotel. We sponsor leadership trainings based on "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." We host a yearlong weekly program in wine, open to any employee, that prepares participants for the introductory test by the Court of Master Sommeliers. Last year, 14 Montage employees successfully passed the exam. Q. What type of training imbues a Montage employee with the same spirit of hospitality?

A. Before they ever greet their first guests, each new staff member participates in "Mores," our two-day orientation program. They meet and interact with our management team and first sense the Montage family camaraderie and esprit de corps. Mores is followed by a day that includes a session called "Listening and Language" and another we call the "Wow Class." We've defined a "wow" as a "spontaneous, personal gesture now."

Q. Can you give an example of a "wow"?

A. One of the most poignant was delivered by Lauren English, a server in our Mosaic Bar and Grille. She was waiting on a couple staying with us for a week, and we knew the woman was dying of cancer. They'd struck up a conversation and when Lauren asked if there was anything she could bring to make their stay more pleasant, the woman joked, "Well, lobster, crab and caviar would be perfect." They all laughed. Later in their room, the couple heard a knock at their door. There was Lauren with a nicely turned out tray of crab cakes. "I didn't bring lobster and caviar, but I hope crab will be all right." The woman cried, the husband cried, Lauren cried.

Q. How do you reinforce that behavior?

A. We've created a weekly colorful and clever "Wow Marquee" next to our Artists Cafe, where staff associates dine, showcasing the best "wows." Some people may think such employee recognition programs are corny, but it's simple psychology: people commit more acts of kindness when they are appreciated for them. Q. How do you convey this do-good culture beyond yourselves?

A. We have a volunteer program called Hearts of Montage, actually founded and led by employees, open to all staff members, their family and friends. They organize quarterly beach cleanups; blood, food and clothing drives; and holiday Adopt-a-Family programs, as well as participate in charity races and walks. Hundreds of employee volunteers become ambassadors of our culture out in the community. This makes them feel good about themselves, good about where they work - and the community feels good about us, too.

Q. So the bottom line, then, is how do you measure loyalty?

A. There have been zero turnovers among the 14 members on our senior executive team in six years (we opened five years ago). And our management turnover has been less than 10 percent in that same time. The turnover rate for nonmanagement associates is 25 percent, half the national norm. I think that spells loyalty.