

GREENING WITH MEANING

by Steve Pinetti
Kimpton Hotels, Sr. VP Sales and Marketing

With the media so often reporting corporate dishonesty, it's no wonder today's consumers are a mix of savvy and skeptical. It's become more important than ever for businesses to back up their message with consistent and reliable action - even more so when it pertains to something people are as passionate about as the environment.

As the executive management team leader for EarthCare and Social Responsibility at Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, I know that adding an environmental initiative to your business isn't as simple as rolling out a new and improved formula. Helping our planet can be personal, political, and even profound to some. It's about the future - for us and our children. And when you're dealing with a matter that holds such weight, it's important to remain authentic and clear in your message.

Coming Clean on Green Washing

'Green' is the marketing buzzword of the new millennium thanks to extensive coverage in respected media like Time, Vanity Fair, Elle, and the Oscar winning film Inconvenient Truth. An eco-focus has the power to move market share and hotels are taking notice. In a recent Deloitte survey, it was found that some 34 percent of travelers seek out hotels that are environmentally friendly, just as 38 percent have researched green lodging facilities either online or by asking friends and relatives. Similarly, 28 percent say they would be willing to pay 10 percent more to stay in a green lodging facility.

There are many reputable hotel brands, such as Kimpton, that have an authentic desire to help the environment by evaluating and changing their products, services, and operational practices to become eco-friendly. However at the same time, we read everyday about brands that engage in 'greenwashing' - misrepresenting the extent of their eco-programs in hopes of gaining market share.

What is a "Real" Hospitality Eco-Program?

Today, there is no industry standard that fully defines what a credible environmental program is, leaving a lot of room for subjective opinion. Most people, though, would agree that a hotel whose only eco-practice is the towel and linen re-use program or that simply offers guests a carbon offset, doesn't have a fully-developed eco-program. On the flipside,

most people would probably agree a hotel that has gone through the rigors of securing LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification (of which there are fewer than 20 at the time of this article) is highly evolved in the green space, and taking the matter seriously.

In between these two ends of the spectrum are many hotels that weren't born green, and are now making a concerted effort to incorporate eco-practices and services into their operations. In hotels like these, what makes a great program over a good one?

It wouldn't be fair to critique the hotels that aren't doing a whole lot - all eco-steps are good no matter how small. There can be a lot of challenges and fears to overcome before implementing a program and while the cause is urgent, each company has its own pace. There's only one group that could be called inappropriate and that is any company that claims to be doing more than they really are. It can be deadly to a company's reputation to mislead the consumer. Honesty and transparency are crucial. For the most part, consumers don't expect every business to be eco-friendly from floor to ceiling, but if an organization can take sincere action to the best of its ability, people appreciate the honest effort.

Four Fears Hotels Face to Becoming Eco-Friendly

What are the challenges hotels face in becoming eco-friendly? With so many brands entering the eco-space, it's hard to understand why there are still hold-outs, but there are some common fears that get in the way of progress.

1) Fear of Change

People are creatures of habit. Asking someone to change the way they do their job takes away the comfort of a routine they've worked hard to establish. One of the surefire ways to break through this resistance is to find the employees who truly care about environmental issues and enlist them to help with the creation and implementation of the program. Their passion can serve as a model of behavior to peers, and can go a long way in igniting the enthusiasm of fellow employees.

2) Fear of Cost

There has long been a perception that it's expensive to be green. In some cases, it's still true when you compare



the premium prices of organic produce in your local grocery to the non-organic variety, for example. However, due to increased consumer

demand for eco-friendly products and practices, there has been a large influx of high-quality eco-products into the marketplace at competitive prices. There is also compelling cost savings on the back end. Compact florescent lights (CFL) are the best example. A CFL replacing a 75 watt incandescent fixture offers an average annual savings of \$22 from reduced energy usage and cost of labor to change lamps. The capital investment of \$2 per fixture is typically paid back in less than two months. Using old-fashion incandescent lighting is not only bad for the planet, but bad for the bottom line. When the cost savings is recognized, it's easy to make the change.

3) Fear of Compromising the Guest Experience

It's understandable that hotel executives worry about down-grading their guest experience by going eco. They wonder "Will the non-toxic cleaning agents work as well? Will the lighting be unflattering from CFL bulbs?" These are valid concerns, for it used to be that eco-products weren't on par with standard hospitality products. The emergence of a stylish and affluent generation of people who wear high-end eco-clothing lines like Edun and drive luxury hybrid cars has increased demand on suppliers and service providers to make available high-quality, high-performing, and even quite hip eco-products. Hotels now have many alternatives to change to environmentally friendly products and practices without compromising the guest experience they are used to delivering.

4) Fear of Eco-Overload

Initiating an environmental program can be overwhelming. There's so many small ways to make a difference that it can be hard to pick a starting point. However, there are efficient, effective, and powerful hospitality eco-programs out there with no more than 10 practices in place. Hotels should start with the easiest and fastest ideas first so the program gains instant momentum and rapid support. Larger hotel chains can even beta test the practices first among their hotels to compare efficacy and guest feedback. Smaller hotels can try out new ideas on one or two floors. Case in point, in 1990 the Hotel Triton, a Kimpton hotel in San Francisco, designated one entire level as its Eco-Floor so they could gauge guest reaction to newly installed energy efficient lighting, low-flow water systems, air purifiers, recycling containers, and all-natural bath products. Guests did, in fact, notice and reaction was very positive. Guests started to request rooms on the Eco-Floor and as demand increased, the hotel expanded its program to all seven floors. In 2004, the hotel was selected as the "green model hotel" by the State of California.

"The Secret" of an Effective Eco-Program

The secret ingredient of a successful hotel eco-program is the company's commitment to the behavior change and culture change within its management and executive team. When developing an environmental program, it's important to emphasize operations, but it's equally important to shift the culture of the organization -- starting with the front line employees, all the way to the executive team -- to a more eco-friendly one.

For example, you can change the lightbulbs on property to compact fluorescent ones, but if the staff isn't turning them off when they leave the room, then the program suffers a setback. You can offer guests in-room recycling bins, but if the housekeeping staff throws bags full of recyclables in with their main trash, then

progress is limited. Having the support of all team members creates an openness and willingness to try, test, and pilot new products and practices. Buy-in for the program increases the likelihood that employees will bring the practices from work into their home and vice versa. The lines become closer between company values and employee values, and eventually become one.

How Consumers Can Spot a Fake

Until a national eco-standard is established and accepted for all hotels, consumers are on their own to research eco-options through word of mouth, online searches, and combing web resources like expedia.com that provide green hotel listings. One way to know the validity of a hotel's eco-program is by the various awards and honors they have won. Kimpton hotels in particular have won many awards - two of which are The National Geographic and Travel Industry Association Award. Another green indicator is if the hotel has any local third-party endorsements or certifications. San Francisco has a Green Business Program that distinguishes companies that have taken action to help the environment and Kimpton has enjoyed many years of recognition as one of the city's best examples of a socially responsible company, largely because of our EarthCare practice.

How Eco-Hospitality is Changing the World

Hotels have an opportunity to impact the consumer in a very unique and personal way. Unlike a store which offers simply a shopping experience, or a restaurant that offers a dining experience, a hotel offers a living experience. For the duration of their stay, the hotel has an opportunity to support the guest in the daily rituals of life, like sleeping, dining, bathing, working and playing. While away from home, senses and awareness are heightened, and fun opportunities to 'try on' different choices present themselves. People are more willing try a different brand of

shampoo, a new technology, or an unusual cocktail. Guests love the experiences they have in trying on different choices and it isn't limited to material things; values are extended as well. If a hotel values helping the environment, then a guest may adopt that value as their own at home. Countless Kimpton guests have said things like, "I never thought about recycling my coat hangers before," or "I always thought that CFL lights were unflattering, but I looked fine in the mirror. Who knew?" The ripple effect is exciting.

While companies can make a huge difference, it really comes down to each person making individual choices to help the environment. We hope we make it easier by giving them an eco-friendly choice in hotels. ■

*Steve Pinetti is Senior Vice President,
Sales and Marketing of Kimpton Hotels.*