



LODGING HOSPITALITY

IDEAS FOR HOTEL DEVELOPERS & OPERATORS

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At Your Service

Inside the world's best Doubletree Hotel

It's in Naples, perhaps the hottest upscale resort market in Florida. But it's not on the city's famous beach, or on one of its scores of golf courses or near the main shopping and restaurant areas. Yet, the five-year-old Doubletree Guest Suites Naples is probably the best property in the 155-unit Doubletree system, maybe even in the entire Hilton family of hotels.

Says who, and by what measurement? The yardstick is the only one that counts: guests say so, both with their enthusiastic feedback and with their habit of coming back to the hotel on a regular basis. For the past two years, the Doubletree Naples has been the winner of the brand's Connie Award, the top honor any Hilton-branded property can achieve. The hotel also won the award in 2002. The Connie is named for Hilton founder Conrad Hilton.

In addition, the property won the equally prestigious CARE Cup, a reflection of the winner's excellence in employee relations, guest service and community involvement.

Just what is it about a 101-suite full-service hotel on U.S. 41 in north Naples that has enabled it to win the top awards in the Doubletree system for the past two years? The answers are simple, the execution extremely hard; otherwise, every hotel in the country would be doing it and achieving the same results.

At this hotel, the high-level of performance starts but doesn't end with General Manager Vikki Fritz, a bundle of genuine enthusiasm, compassion and hospitality. As the cliché goes, she doesn't just talk the talk; she walks the walk, literally. Most days, she is not at her desk in the executive office but out front in the hotel,



Fritz (second from right) receives the CARE Cup from Doubletree executive Nancy Capozio. Joining in were Guest Services VP Barry Trice (left) and President & CEO Gerry Gabrys.



The property overlooks the Cocohatchee River and Wildlife Preserve.



The Doubletree Naples has 101 suites.



GM Fritz is often found mixing with guests and associates.

working side by side with housekeepers or front desk agents, or out on sales calls, or chatting with guests in the hotel's small three-meal restaurant.

"The attitude of all of our associates is to give our guests what they ask for," says Fritz. "It's a simple philosophy, but it has tremendous power both for the guests and our associates. There's no way we could receive the awards we do if our associates didn't have such pride in their work and our hotel."

Fritz believes strongly in the importance of attitude in the hiring decision. "We spend a lot of time in making our hiring decisions, and the first thing we consider is personality," she says. "Our internal training programs as well as those from Hilton enable us to give them the skills they need to perform their tasks. But it doesn't work if they don't have the right attitude."

That's the philosophy hotel owner Guest Services, Inc. used in promoting Fritz to her first GM position. She joined the company from an f&b job at Ritz-Carlton to work at a senior living condo facility Guest Services operates in Naples.

"Right away we recognized that Vikki's skills far exceed the area of food and beverage," says Gerry Gabrys, president & CEO of Guest Services, a Maryland-based company that provides management services at more than 250 hospitality operations, including hotels, museums, senior living centers, campus dining, restaurants and government & business dining. "She is obsessed with going a good job and never rests on her laurels. It was a natural decision for us to appoint her general manager of the Doubletree."

Guest Services, both from headquarters and through Naples-based Vice President Barry Trice, provides Fritz with a lot of support. One ace in the hole is Sig Front, a legendary hotel marketer who serves as a consultant to the company and the Naples Doubletree.

"I serve as a sounding board for Vikki and Barry on advertising, marketing and sales issues," says Front, the former head of worldwide marketing for Sheraton Hotels and a 1978 inductee into the HSMIA Hall of Fame. "One philosophy I believe in that Vikki has adopted wholeheartedly is the high-profile role the GM should take in the sales effort."

PAMPERING BUILDS LOYALTY

Because guests feel pampered at the Doubletree Naples, many of them return to the property every winter. Those who book for seven nights or longer receive a special amenity and personal calls from the concierge and often Fritz as well. In mid-March, for example, 20 of the property's 101 rooms had guests who were staying for more than a week; one party had two rooms for a 29-night stay.

Despite fierce loyalty among its in-season snowbird guests, the Doubletree needs to switch marketing gears in the off-peak summer season for focus on locally generated corporate transient and meeting business. (Facilities include a divisible 2,000-square-foot ballroom and a smaller boardroom.) Because of the explosive growth in the region, a lot of companies have located in the Naples-Fort Myers area; but competition is stiff, with 10 or more up-scale and luxury hotels pursuing the same business. The connection to Hilton is also important. According to Guest Services VP Trice, 63 cents of every dollar spent at the Naples property can be traced to the Hilton HHonors loyalty program.

Sports teams are another strong source of off-season and shoulder-season business. That business will get a boost next year with the opening of a large sports complex not far from the Doubletree. Facilities will include a water-park, softball diamonds and eight soccer fields.

A CARING HOTEL

Doubletree brand management applies very specific criteria in choosing its award winners. The Connie, for example, rates properties in a number of key areas: physical condition and cleanliness, consistency, compliance with brand standards and guest loyalty. The top 10 properties in the system receive Doubletree Pride Awards, and the best of the best gets the Connie.

"The CARE Cup is really the heart and soul of the brand because it speaks to the culture of Doubletree," says Dave Horton, a Hilton senior vice president and the Doubletree brand manager. "The award is named for our core value, CARE, which stands for caring, attentiveness, responsiveness and empowerment."

The Doubletree Naples' CARE Committee is at the center of the property's success. A mixture of line-level employees and managers work together to select, plan and execute projects with a variety of community organizations, including Big Brothers and the Children's Network. Each spring and fall, the hotel also partners with a local elementary school as part of the brand's Teaching Kids to CARE program. In the spring, it's a tree-planting ceremony on Arbor Day.

Doubletree brand managers review quarterly summary reports, called CARE Packets, to evaluate each property's involvement with its guests, associates and community. The award is based on how the hotels conduct their CARE committees and the properties' performance against the chain's brand promise index, a 12-part measure that, says Horton, "fuels the chain's mission to become the first-choice brand among consumers."

"The work of the CARE Committee is a great way to bring the employees together with a single focus," says Fritz. "As a result, it instills a lot of pride in our associates."

A BRAND REBORN

The Doubletree Naples is a poster child for the brand's overall renaissance. The chain is in the middle of a \$319-million initiative to upgrade Doubletree's product, service and image. Centerpiece of the program is the new Sweet Dreams bedding package that will be installed in all guest-rooms in the system. Other improvements include high-speed Internet access in all rooms and upgraded bathrooms.

According to Horton, about 70 properties are in some stage of improvement projects, and the program is already producing benefits.

"Those properties that have completed the process are helping the chain make significant advances in our key measurements," says Horton. "For example, on a 12-month rolling average our loyalty scores are up 5.3 points, or nine percent."

The Big Ideas

The secrets to the Doubletree Guest Suites' success are no secret. Every hotel owner and operator knows what makes a property great and inspires loyalty among guests. Few, however, do what it takes to make it happen. Here are the principles the owner, management and staff at the Naples property follow to keep it at the top of its class:

Quality takes care of everything else. Everyone at Guest Services—GM Vikki Fritz, VP Barry Trice and President & CEO Gerry Gabrys—preaches the same message: provide the highest quality in all aspects of the operation and good results will follow.

"It has been ingrained in our company culture for 88 years," says Gabrys. "In everything we do, and at every one of our facilities, we treat everyone with the utmost of integrity. If you do so, everything else falls into place."

Maintain properties at the highest level possible. "Every time I talk to Gerry Gabrys, our president, the first thing he asks is if there is anything we need or anything he can do to help," says Trice. "He believes in keeping the property in first-class condition always."

As part of that philosophy, the company decided to immediately install Doubletree's new Sweet Dreams bedding in all suites, instead of phasing them in over several years. Also in the works are upgrades to the property's fitness area, business center and the addition of a new upscale restaurant that will be leased to a third party.

Praise, encourage and mentor employees at all levels. According to Trice, Fritz is a GM who leads by example and helps associates develop new skills. As example, periodically Fritz will take front desk agents with her on sales calls to give them an opportunity to learn another skill and to help instill them with confidence.

Seek others outside the organization who can add value. Guest Services wisely turned to marketing guru Sig Front as a sounding board for the operations and marketing of its Naples property. The former head of Sheraton's marketing efforts is a walking encyclopedia of hotel sales and marketing. He offers advice and counsel to Fritz and Trice on how to maximize the property's marketing efforts, and, on occasion he accompanies hotel sales people on calls.

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