

LEADERS IN *Hospitality* For People Who Want the Best

An Interview with Daniel R. Flannery, Vice President
and Area General Manager, The Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming his current role, Daniel Flannery was General Manager of The Ritz-Carlton New York, Battery Park, and the RIHGA Royal Hotel in New York. His background in operations, restaurant concept development, financial management, and team building has contributed to his successful 25-year career working with luxury properties in the north-east United States. He serves on the board of directors of the Hotel Association of New York City, Inc.; is a member of the advisory board executive committee of New York University's Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism, and Sports Management; and serves on the Dean's advisory council of the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland.



Daniel R. Flannery

PROPERTY BRIEF Located in Manhattan, The Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park (www.ritzcarlton.com), offers luxurious hotel hospitality in 259 guest rooms, including 47 spacious one-bedroom suites and 12 luxury condominiums. Guest rooms feature fine linens, marble baths with soaking tubs and separate stall showers, exclusive Frédéric Fekkai amenities, and spectacular views of the park. The property also offers an on-site fitness center; a La Prairie spa; a full-service, multilingual concierge; limousine and Bentley services; and a conference concierge. The hotel's restaurant, BLT Market, features the seasonal, market-inspired cuisine of acclaimed celebrity chef Laurent Tourondel.

In today's economic turmoil, have you seen a major impact on business at The Ritz-Carlton, Central Park, and do you see growth as you look ahead?

We're going to grow revenue in this hotel about 15 to 17 percent this year, and last year was a record year for us. We're getting huge growth in food and beverage because of the restaurant. We are seeing the same softening in demand as everyone else, but the diverse nature of our business has made continued growth possible, although not at the rate we have enjoyed in past years.

The restaurant on the property, BLT Market, was a departure from what many expected, but it has been a success. What has made it so successful, and did you know it would work?

It was very different for us. You never know what will work until you throw the doors open and watch people walk in or hear the phones ring. But we felt like the days of those really formal, quiet, closed-in, dark, stuffy hotel restaurants were gone. There are very few restaurants that can really run that style of formality and be successful. So it was quite a physical departure, with natural light, no window treatments, and a more casual feel. This has been a big success because the style is right, the food is great, and Chef Laurent Tourondel's name has a lot of appeal. He has such a loyal following of customers, and he does a good job of communicating with his customers. The location is ideal on Central Park South and Sixth Avenue, and having an outside entrance has certainly made it more accessible to the public.

For your property, suites are a major focus and a major interest. Do you have the right components here, when you look at the accommodation offering?

We never completely have the right components, because the demand always changes, and tastes always change. A year and a half ago, we blew out four rooms and put in a low-floor presidential suite, because there was demand for that. And a year and a half before that, we took the corners of all the high floors of the hotel and expanded the suites and made them bigger. And we have a couple of international groups and clients that are requesting that we take the 22nd floor and make The Ritz-Carlton suite much bigger and grander. The rooms that have the best views are the ones that sell first, and the bigger suites run higher occupancy than the smaller suites, so there is still a market for people who want the best and are willing to pay for it. So we're looking at plans now.

How have you managed to incorporate technology into the hotel while ensuring you don't lose the human element?

The top luxury customers value service and simplicity. They expect wireless high-speed Internet access when they want it, but a lot fewer of our guests use the Internet, because we don't have as many mid-level managers working in their rooms. CEOs and presidents of companies are not sending out e-mail all day. Of course, we need to have high-definition flat-screen TVs. But some hotels may

have overdone it by automating everything on a touch panel. Some guests are intimidated by that and don't know how to use it. It's great to say you can close the drapes with the touch of a button, but our customers want us to offer a turn-down service and close the drapes for them. So we want to be current, but we make sure that we're not using technology to make guests do for themselves what they expect us to do for them.

How has the role of general manager changed or evolved? Do you need to be more of a generalist now?

You need to know enough in each area to know what kind of team to put together. You can get carried away with your own understanding of something, but I realize that no matter how much I think I know about food, for example, the chef is always going to know more. So a lot of it is knowing enough to get the right talent. It's enough to know how to recruit people who are right for the needs you have at the time and who are experts in their disciplines.

Is this an industry that you always knew you wanted to be in? How did you end up in the business?

I went to the University of Maryland as an English major, and my intention was to graduate and go to law school. But I needed a job to put myself through college, so I got a job at the Marriott Hotel in Maryland. I was a busboy in one restaurant and a waiter in the other. I moved up in the nicer dining room and was recruited to a captain position there. That's how I determined I really liked the business. I was at a state school that did not have a hospitality program, so I earned a business degree at Maryland and stayed with Marriott and then moved to The Ritz-Carlton many years later.

Many say that leading a hotel is a 24/7 job. Is it challenging to get time away?

I always tell people that we get paid to make people feel good. What better way to make a living? But it's a 24/7 business, and being a general manager means that occasionally you're going to get a call at 2:00 AM saying that the pipes broke or that there is a fire in the laundry chute. You have to jump in and get involved in emergencies. In this business, if you want to be the best, it has to be worth it for you to make sacrifices. You can't be good at anything by putting only a little bit into it. ●

Ritz-Carlton Suite living room

