

# LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

## The Halekulani Experience

An Interview with Gerald Glennon,  
General Manager, Halekulani Hotel



**EDITORS' NOTE** Gerald Glennon assumed his current post in September 2008. Prior to joining Halekulani as Executive Assistant Manager in 2001, Glennon served as General Manager of Sofitel Miami. From 1978 through 1987, Glennon served in management positions at various hospitality companies, including Western International Hotels and Amfac Hotels & Resorts. Glennon received a B.S. in business administration from the University of Northern Colorado and a B.S. in hotel administration from the University of Denver.



Gerald Glennon

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Halekulani Hotel ([www.halekulani.com](http://www.halekulani.com)) is consistently ranked among the world's best hotels. The 455-room resort, surrounded by open courtyards and lush gardens, is situated on five prime oceanfront acres on Waikiki Beach. Guest facilities include three restaurants, a cocktail lounge, a pool, a spa, a fitness room, a business center, a hospitality suite, and five meeting and banquet rooms. Halekulani is managed by the Hotels & Resorts of Halekulani, a brand management division of the Honolulu-based Halekulani Corporation.

### How have current economic conditions affected tourism for Hawaii and for Halekulani?

It's interesting times for everyone, and Hawaii has not been unaffected. People are still willing to make the trek to the islands, but they're looking for more value, and that's benefited Waikiki because people want everything an urban resort destination can offer. As an independent luxury hotel, our markets are not as sensitive as deluxe hotels or budget hotels. People at this level are still traveling, but they're looking for value.

### How challenging is it to differentiate your brand, and what makes Halekulani unique?

What really differentiates us is the relationship aspect, which is so critical to the experience at Halekulani. We get to know our customers and their preferences, and we deal with them in a very up-front and knowledgeable fashion when creating experiences for them.

### Do you need a full spa component to be a luxury property, and is that a focus for Halekulani?

At this level, you do have to offer the spa amenity. Our spa is intimate, with seven private suites and a small retail component in the salon. It was founded on the healing principles of the South Pacific and Hawaii. Although it's small, it's incredibly high-touch. The service culture that exists within the hotel has been brought into the spa.

### How have you implemented technology for your guests while maintaining the human interaction that is essential to this business?

Guests want connectivity, but they don't want to pay for it. Our property is wireless wall-to-wall, and it's all provided on a complimentary basis. We offer checkout via television if a guest chooses that. Through our business center, we can provide anything from conference calling to audiovisual support. We recently added 40-inch Sony LCD flat-panel televisions, which introduce connectivity options for guests. However, since the day we opened 25 years ago, we escort every single guest from the reception area to the room. They are checked in in the privacy of their rooms, and that's something we will never move away from. It gives us a chance to orient guests to the property and let them know what is available to them while they're here.

### How much of a focus is employee retention?

We have 455 rooms and almost 1,000 employees on staff – probably 30 percent of them have been here from the beginning. With the sense of ownership that our employees have, our turnover is less than 5 percent. We have guests who have been coming here for years as well, so it's become a legacy hotel. They come back because of the relationships. It's like coming home for many of them, and it's what has made this hotel so successful.

### Did you know early on in your career this was an industry you wanted to be in?

I obtained a degree in business with a minor in philosophy, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I found myself working in a hotel in Denver, and it captivated me. I enrolled in the University of Denver's hotel program. From there I was recruited by a hotel company, and

the rest is history. I've worked in all facets of the business, and what I like most is that it's a very dynamic business. Everything that it takes to run a city, it takes to run a hotel, and I love that fast-paced dynamic. I'm very much a people person. I thoroughly enjoy the day-to-day interaction with colleagues, staff, and guests, and I can't see myself doing anything else.

### Is the property focused specifically on a high-end discerning traveler, or is it broader than that?

Our market is broader than that, but the core of our business is the high-end traveler. When you ask people what luxury is, they'll say it's fine bed linens, state-of-the-art technology, and all of the accoutrements that you expect with a luxury hotel. I think luxury is a state of mind, and people seek a hotel like Halekulani because it's experiential. We cater to people who are interested not only in a hotel room and a week in Honolulu, but who are looking for something above and beyond that.

### Is the term luxury overused, has it lost its meaning, and how do you define it?

We show up every day and try to be true to our founding principles, making certain our guests have the kind of experience they're looking for. We exist to protect and steward the legacy of service and experience that is Halekulani. The name Halekulani was bestowed on this hotel by fishermen who were shown great hospitality by the owners of this parcel of land, and it translates to "House Befitting Heaven." So this name has been perpetuated and believed in for almost a century now. To say we are a luxury hotel is one thing; to have people accept and believe it is another, and that's really what differentiates this hotel.

### How challenging is it to find a work/life balance, and do you have the ability to turn it off?

I can turn it off because I have great confidence in the leadership team at Halekulani. I find it invigorating to get away from my hotel. The fact that I can do that is very reassuring for my staff. It's critical to obtain some downtime because otherwise it's not good for your health or the business. I don't want to be remembered as the guy who was always turning the light off. ●

*The view from Halekulani*