

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

A Comfortable, Homelike Feel

An Interview with Leland Lewis,
General Manager, InterContinental The Barclay New York



EDITORS' NOTE Leland Lewis has spent the vast majority of his career with InterContinental Hotels & Resorts. He also held positions at the Four Seasons in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco. Lewis recently rejoined the InterContinental The Barclay New York, where he started his InterContinental career as Director of Marketing in 1983.



PROPERTY BRIEF The 686-room flagship hotel for InterContinental Hotels & Resorts in North America, the InterContinental The Barclay New York (www.new-york-barclay.intercontinental.com), is located on 48th Street just off Park Avenue in the heart of midtown Manhattan's East Side. The hotel is steps away from numerous Fortune 500 company headquarters, Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue shopping, fine dining, Broadway theaters, the Chrysler Building, Grand Central Terminal, world-famous museums, and Rockefeller Center.

How have current economic conditions affected The Barclay?

This past year, we've seen change in business coming from financial institutions. However, we have great relationships with non-financial service companies and an excellent rapport with international tour operators and travel companies that bring visitors from Europe and the rest of the world. So what we've lost from the financial industry, we have replaced with other market segments.

How much of your clientele is tourists versus businesspeople?

Our international tourism segment is actually increasing now, particularly in view of the current valuation of the U.S. dollar against foreign currencies. We expect that market to diminish for 2009 and possibly longer. This is motivating us to promote to industries that are more recessionproof. For example, sporting events are very attractive to us. We did a large program with Major League Baseball this year in conjunction with the All-Star game at Yankee Stadium. It was a huge success, as was this year's U.S. Open and the New York City Marathon. We're trying to participate in cooperative events of this type and develop new business from nontraditional corporations and associations.

How challenging is it to differentiate among competitors?

The most critical factor is our location. And we're a fine hotel, our service culture is strong, and our average staff tenure is 15 years. We've got a stable veteran staff and a management team dedicated to the mission of operating hotels that guests love. The Barclay is unique; we have history, tradition, and heritage. That is what we believe guests want to experience when visiting New York. The grandeur of our lobby, fine cuisine, and dedica-

tion to service makes The Barclay a memorable New York experience.

How much of a focus are spa and fitness facilities at The Barclay?

They are important elements moving forward, because people want to be pampered, and quality of life is a priority for most of us. We just recently renovated our fitness center by increasing its size, adding all new equipment, and renovating the sauna, steam, and massage rooms. Guest response has been very positive.

How much of an impact has technology had on the property?

Technology is changing so rapidly that it's hard to stay on the cutting edge. In our newer hotels, everything is state of the art, but in The Barclay, built in 1926, the infrastructure is older and somewhat more challenging to work with. Of course, we offer electronic room keys and safes, Movies On Demand, high-speed Internet, and Wi-Fi, all of which are expected by our clientele. All of our back-of-the-house and property management systems are top of the line as well. Our Concierge Lounge is unique and offers four touch-screen computers to help guests do research on all that New York has to offer. This year, we plan to offer a kiosk for self check-in and check-out. We are considering other gadgets, like handheld GPSs that would help our guests locate and explore facilities around the city. For the time being, we rely on our traditional guest services like concierge and guest relations to fulfill these needs.

Why have you focused so much attention on renovating?

The Barclay has a long-held reputation as a New York "grande dame," so we are obligated to meet high guest expectations. That requires us to keep these older facilities fresh and pristine while upgrading to evolving technology

levels and meeting service demands. We can't stay competitive without doing so. In 2009 and 2010, we will spend \$7 to \$9 million to refurbish guest rooms with new carpets, bedspreads, curtains, and wall coverings. While we could do a more extensive refurbishment, we find it close to impossible to take too many guest rooms out of inventory because of high demand. We ran close to 94 percent occupancy in 2008, and if the economy rebounds soon, we expect a similar result for 2009. It's a good problem to have.

Is it important for InterContinental hotels to have a consistent feel across the board?

That's certainly what we want, and InterContinental does this well. Our hotels can be historic, ultramodern, or somewhere in between, but they all provide the InterContinental experience. The standards are more uniform than ever before, so the feel to the guest is familiar and predictable even as each hotel represents its own location. All have Priority Club check-in, a special guest relations staff for VIPs, and a uniquely well-designed concierge service. All of our guest rooms are consistent in terms of quality of linens, amenities, collateral, and services.

How has the role of General Manager evolved?

The role of a General Manager has never been more complex. While the traditional innkeeper's roles of greeting guests, solving guest issues, and managing a team are still important, more is required today. We also have to be well versed in marketing, revenue management, and forecasting accuracy. The emphasis on the financial side of the business is critical. The need to change strategies and tactics is a daily challenge and a critical ability if targets are to be met. If I had one essential recommendation to make to new GMs, it would be to hire the most knowledgeable department heads you can find. Surround yourself with expertise.

Do you take time to appreciate your successes, or are you always looking forward to future challenges?

I'm goal oriented in terms of meeting a challenge and reaching the targets. Our entire team is competitive – we like to win. And we do celebrate our successes. It's a way to team build and keep us motivated as we move on to the next challenge. ●

The Barclay Bar & Grill