

# LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

## A Feel Like Home

An Interview with Gail R. Isono,  
General Manager, The Huntington Hotel and Nob Hill Spa

**EDITORS' NOTE** In 1990, Gail Isono joined The Huntington Hotel as a Sales Manager and soon advanced to Director of Sales and Marketing before assuming her current post. She is the first woman to serve in the top post of the 85-year-old property and has more than 26 years of experience in the hospitality industry.



**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Huntington Hotel ([www.huntingtonhotel.com](http://www.huntingtonhotel.com)) was built in 1924 as one-bedroom apartments atop San Francisco's coveted Nob Hill. The property offers 135 guest rooms and suites decorated in an understated, yet elegant, style and includes amenities like complimentary chauffeured transportation to Union Square and the Financial District and access to Nob Hill Spa and the spa's indoor pool, Jacuzzi, and eucalyptus-infused steam rooms. The Huntington Hotel also features the award-winning Big 4 Restaurant. Owned by Nob Hill Properties, Inc., the luxurious hotel is a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide and Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

**With the economic challenges that have faced the travel and tourism market, has there been a major impact on the business in San Francisco in general, and for The Huntington Hotel specifically?**

In San Francisco in general, although it's been challenging to try to keep our rates up, the demand has still been there. People really want to come here.

As far as The Huntington Hotel, the fun part for me is that almost every e-comment card or response we get back from a customer or guest who has been here always makes some note of how wonderful it has been and how the Huntington is like home because everyone is taking care of them.

**Are your room and suite offerings designed to appeal to a specific niche or to a broader market?**

They appeal to a broad market. We've decided that we can appeal to everyone; it's just a matter of getting the word out there. We have repeat customers who have been staying here for 30 years, and we have new customers who have finally decided that it's time to pamper themselves and that they

should be here and enjoy a new experience.

**Are there any new additions or renovations planned for the property or are you satisfied with where it is today?**

We never stay the same. There are always renovations and changes. In 2009, we completed 39 rooms; in 2008, we completed a whole new suite called the Mulholland Suite; and we're looking forward to 2010.

**Many hoteliers say that during boom times, suites were selling first. Has that changed and, if so, how have you adapted to that?**

Yes, that has changed. People are still looking for value, but this was an apartment building when it was built in 1924, so we are unusual in that we're very suite heavy. However, that often gives us the opportunity to take care of repeat guests and those visiting for special occasions by giving them an upgrade when they weren't expecting it.

**San Francisco is known for great stand-alone restaurants. Is it challenging to have a successful hotel restaurant, and how important has it been for Big 4 to become a part of the community?**

It's always a challenge because people are always looking for something new to try. But we have created interest by highlighting our people – we have bartenders who have their own fan clubs – and we've become the Cheers of San Francisco because everybody ends up here at the end of the evening. With the restaurant, we're opening up new opportunities by using new technology and e-marketing to bring the younger folks in. I've been amazed to see people taking pictures of their food before they eat it and posting them on a blog.

**Over the past few years in the luxury segment, there has been a heavier focus on not only providing a fitness center but also offering a full spa experience. Will you give an overview of the Nob Hill Spa and its importance to your guest experience?**

The spa is an integral part of The Huntington Hotel, and of people's lifestyles. The Nob Hill Spa continues to be a retreat for those in the luxury market to come in and enjoy themselves in the beautiful ambiance of the spa. In addition, during these stressful times, it's even more important for people to start taking care of

mind, body, and soul, and that's where Nob Hill Spa comes in.

**You offer an intimate setting for meetings and events. Are they generally high-level with fewer people, or are you able to accommodate larger social gatherings?**

For the most part, the meetings that we have at the hotel are on a smaller, more upscale basis. But we've started working with some of the larger facilities in the city, using unique transportation options to bring people back and forth. This way, customers can have a larger event that we would not be able to hold at the hotel and, at the same time, be taken care of after their event with the home-away-from-home experience we provide at The Huntington.

**This is a property that has retained many long-term employees, which is appreciated by regular guests who like to see the same faces. What is it about the culture that has made it so successful at retaining its talent?**

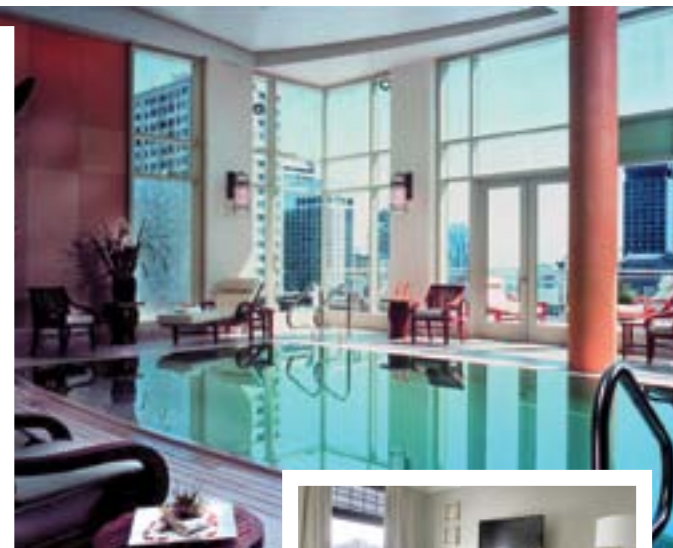
It starts with family. We're family-owned and operated, and the philosophy of the Cope family has always been to treat everyone like a part of the family and as a priority of the family, and that's resulted in the longevity of the employees.

**Having been at The Huntington for a number of years in a leadership role, have you seen the role of General Manager change, and today, do you need to be a bit more of a generalist to manage the many different facets of the business?**

You have to have a pure interest in everything that touches the hotel – the employees, the guests, and the owners. That doesn't mean that you have to be the best at knowing all of the criteria in every area, but rather that you have to be curious enough to ask the questions, then keep an open mind and bring in the new concepts that keep the hotel growing.

**Could you ever have imagined when you first came to the property, that you would have had this type of tenure here?**

Never in my dreams. But it stays fresh. There is always something more, and so much potential. I can always see another light at the end of the tunnel. ●



The entrance to Huntington Hotel on Nob Hill (left); the pool at the Nob Hill Spa (top right); luxury room (bottom)