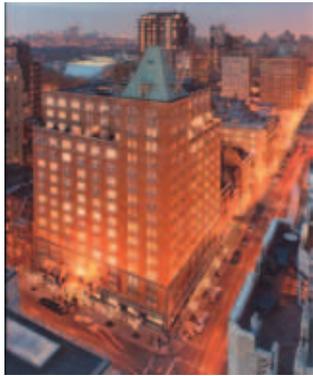


Hospitality's Global Impact



Making a Mark

An Interview with James Sherwin,
General Manager, The Mark Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE James Sherwin spent 14 years within The Savoy Group in sales and marketing and operational training at properties including The Savoy, The Berkeley, Claridge's, The Connaught, the Hôtel Lancaster in Paris, The Lygon Arms in Broadway, and at a health farm called Forest Mere. He worked for a year at the SBM in Monte Carlo. He ran Britain's foremost event planning company Party Planners, owned by Lady Elizabeth Anson, cousin to Her Majesty The Queen, for two years then moved to the U.S. to be the Executive Manager at the The Carlyle in New York for 10 years before assuming his current post with The Mark Hotel.



James Sherwin

PROPERTY BRIEF Upper East Side-based The Mark Hotel (www.themarkhotel.com) first opened its doors in 1927. Having undergone a total transformation overseen by legendary designer Jacques Grange, the elegant new design includes works created by celebrated artists who have been commissioned to create one-of-a-kind pieces. The Mark is mere steps from Central Park, world renowned museums, and galleries, and offers guests a stylish yet inviting location with access to the best Madison Avenue has to offer.

How important was it to retain some of the feel from the past during your recent renovation?

The core of any hotel business is good staff and service, and that we looked to retain. Otherwise, the hotel looks incredibly different than it did before. The Mark, in its new life, makes a huge statement following the efforts of Jacques Grange at the helm of an incredible design team.

So clients will experience a brand new, very smart hotel with great design, and with the same good service they remember but a little better.

Many say that great, old-school service is a lost art. When you look at the hiring and training, how do you create a great service mentality?

One of the keys initially was employing people in the front of house who weren't necessarily experienced. You need your key people to be very experienced, but not the line staff.

We managed to hire wonderful people and train them in what we feel is important. They



knew right away that they were getting something very different in this renovated property and that has helped contribute to a low turnover.

Is there an effective awareness of what the product is today?

Initially, that wasn't necessarily the case, because there was a very good resale campaign for the co-op side of the property. So for a little while, we had to shout pretty loudly that The Mark is a full-on hotel with 100 rooms and 50 suites, which it didn't have in its original plan. Now the perception is out that we are a full-on hotel.

Is there a consistent feel from suite to suite?

If you are in a minimum-rated room, you still have every facility that one of our most expensive suites would have. The difference is purely in scale and square footage.

Even if you have our smallest suite, you have one and a half bathrooms. What was a luxury yesterday has almost become a necessity today. For couples, it is the fashion today that the lady has one bathroom and the man has another.

At the luxury level, do you have to offer a spa experience and has that been a focus for you?

A spa is always a great add-on, but it's not vital. There is only a certain amount of room within the building, but we're surrounded by spas in the area. We have a super state-of-the-art fitness center run by John Sitaras – that is vital.

Most importantly, we have the uptown Frédéric Fekkai hair and beauty salon, and they are doing very well, bringing in many ladies and gentlemen who might not necessarily come into the hotel. While one has treatments, one can have a silver tray brought up with a Jean Georges lunch and a glass of champagne. So it completes the whole experience.

How do you offer the latest technology without losing the personal side of the business?

We have all of the latest technology in the hotel, but there are certain things I have not been in favor of, such as checking out on



television. When you're in a huge hotel with 500 rooms, it's a service that is vital. In our case, with just 100 rooms and 50 suites, it's not. There is always somebody at reception if you want to get a quick read on how much you have spent.

Is your competitive landscape primarily within the Upper East Side or is it much broader?

We concentrate on what is near, because the Upper East Side has an extraordinary appeal that not everyone understands. Part of the trick of running a business here is getting the people to come once, because once they do, they stay and understand what makes this area so marvelous.

However, we do compete with properties in midtown, because we're all pursuing the same sector. We're competing with properties that are owned and run by large companies with huge marketing support. So we have to be innovative to stay ahead of the game with our competitors.

How critical has it been to have owners who have a long-term vision for the property and understand what you need?

When ownership takes an active interest in what you're doing, then it's vital they understand what it takes to make things happen, because the difference in running a deluxe establishment and a non-deluxe establishment is measured in light years. Running a deluxe establishment is very labor intensive, even with today's labor-saving techniques and systems.

So communication with ownership is easier when there is a complete understanding of what our business is about. From the minute this hotel was created, there has been a great understanding.

With all the demands on the role of GM today, how do you balance the need to still be with guests and maintain relationships?

One must never lose the art of client contact. It is easy to slip into the most terrible hole by not putting enough time aside to encourage and maintain a client relationship, no matter how formal or friendly it may be. And that takes time. ●

The Mark Hotel (left); Lobby Seating (center); Entrance (right)