

# Hospitality

## Enhancing the Guest Experience

An Interview with Sebastian Wurst,  
General Manager, Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York



The kitchenette and living area of a Classic Suite

**EDITORS' NOTE** Sebastian Wurst graduated from Hotel Management School in Frankfurt Germany in 1992. From 1993 to 1997, he was the Front Office Manager for Kempinski Hotel Gravenbruch in Frankfurt, Germany. He had a brief stint with Deutsche Lufthansa at JFK airport in 1997 before assuming the role of Front Office Manager and then Executive Assistant Manager at Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York. He received his baccalaureate in humanities in 1988.



Sebastian Wurst

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York ([www.Plaza-Athenee.com](http://www.Plaza-Athenee.com)) is steps from some of the city's most revered attractions, including Central Park, Museum Mile, and Madison Avenue shopping. This 142-room luxury boutique hotel has been the home-away-from-home for sophisticated travelers from around the world for over two decades. Owned by the TCC Group of Thailand, it is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World.

### How is the New York market faring today? Has the business come back strong?

The business has come back, but the rate is not where it's supposed to be. However, high occupancy is definitely the objective.

The landscape has changed for us in terms of our comp set, which has more of an impact than the economy because the Upper East Side was transformed in terms of what is up here.

We have to step up the game to retain our market share.

### You have a residential location and feel. Is your competitive set strictly Upper East Side?

Strictly. The competition for us is located within 15 blocks and that's more uptown than midtown.

### How can you adjust rates during difficult times but bring them back up when things improve?

They don't change as quickly as we would like them to; it's a challenge to bring rates back to 2008 levels. What you have to do to preserve rate integrity is to look more at value-added items such as credit in the restaurant and credit in the spa, which also gives you opportunities for additional revenue.

We're also refocusing on the markets that we haven't explored before.

### How do you define the market? Is it a discerning top tier traveler or is the range broader?

It is more broad than we would like it to be. We have a vision but it doesn't always come through 100 percent. I don't think at the level we are at, with the number of rooms we have, that we can solely rely on that discerning leisure luxury traveler. We have to open our property to a wider audience without sacrificing the experience.

We do that by appealing to different markets, like a younger market, which wasn't our focus in prior years. We added the spa that appeals to those who look for that. We're not striving to attract large groups here because that will be detrimental to our core customers.

### How challenging is it to compete in the food and beverage component when you're in an area with great stand-alone restaurants?

It is challenging and we have already made a few changes to address this: we completely renovated Arabelle Restaurant and spruced up our bar.

It's a competitive environment and people look for the New York restaurant experience. They typically have a list of restaurants they want to go to and it often doesn't include hotel restaurants.

We're focused more on the local market – people from the neighborhood who come here and make it a popular breakfast and lunch spot.

### For today's traveler, did you need to offer the spa experience? Have you been happy with how it has been received?

It's definitely necessary – it's what the gym was 10 years ago; but the gym unfortunately doesn't give you an opportunity to make revenue while the spa does.

We are happy. It's fairly new for us; our spa has only been open two years so we're cultivating more of a loyal clientele. We are seeing a lot of repeat business.

### You're known for your strong suite product. Is there a consistent feel among the suites?

We try to keep the feel consistent with that of a European private residence. However, we did make a concerted effort with the architects to offer some variety. The idea was to have suites with different colors that convey the overall feeling of the hotel, but give

the customer choices. We didn't want a cookie-cutter approach.

### Has the word "luxury" lost some of its meaning?

It depends on how you define that word. Luxury is more about personal attention and making the guest feel at home and less about the 500-thread count sheets and the gold fixtures in the bathroom.

That is how you set yourself apart in that category.

### What service standards have you instituted? How do you ensure that they remain consistent?

Over the past two years, we have made a concerted effort to get customer feedback and to put it into a measurable system. Now that this is in its second year, we are beginning to see trends and areas where we need more focus. Everything has become more measurable.

### How do you offer the technology component today without losing the personal touch?

The focus has to be on the human aspect, not on the technology. But today, people expect certain items and you cannot make up for the lack of those by charm and personal interaction. You have to provide what people think of as basics now – reliable wireless access and state-of-the-art television systems; we're just not over-focusing on these things.

However, those are not really the items our clientele in particular are looking for.

### Is it challenging to compete as an independent property?

A big brand has global support and a much larger marketing budget, which brings with it brand recognition. As an independent, we are more flexible and can react more quickly to trends in the market. We can also be more independent in our decision-making and stay away from the chain feeling, which a lot of people appreciate. Ours is a truly unique experience.

### What are you focused on to make sure the success for the property continues?

I'm most focused on getting this hotel to the next level. We want to consistently look for new ways of enhancing the guest experience. Another strong focus is the staff and making sure we treat them as if they're our customers because they're the ones who make this successful. ●