

Hospitality

Preserving the Essence of The Algonquin

An Interview with
Manuela Rappenecker, General Manager, The Algonquin Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE *Manuela Rappenecker assumed her current post in June of 2014. Prior to this, she was General Manager at The Renaissance New York Hotel 57 from October 2012. She was an Adjunct Professor in the Hospitality School at Florida Atlantic University and she has held the role of Resident Manager at Harbor Beach Marriott Resort & Spa and Director of Operations at Fort Lauderdale Marina Marriott. She was also Adjunct Professor in the Hospitality School at Johnson & Wales University and Executive Assistant Manager, Rooms Division at The Ritz-Carlton, Philadelphia. Earlier, she held various managerial positions at several Marriott properties. She received her Master of Business Administration Degree from Florida Atlantic University and her Bachelor's Degree in Marketing/Marketing Management from Florida State University-College of Business.*



Manuela Rappenecker

PROPERTY BRIEF *The Algonquin Hotel (algonquinhotel.com) is located in the heart of Midtown Manhattan on Club Row at 44th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, just steps from Broadway's theaters and world-class shopping. Home to The Algonquin Round Table made famous by Dorothy Parker and birthplace of The New Yorker, The Algonquin Hotel, which opened in 1902, recently unveiled a \$15-million renovation. Changes include upgrades of the historic lobby's furnishings, the Blue Bar, the renowned Round Table Room restaurant, and all suites and guest rooms.*

How critical has it been to keep some of the heritage of The Algonquin while making it relevant for today?

We completed a renovation in 2012 and did a wonderful job of preserving the essence of The Algonquin from the early 1900s, especially in terms of maintaining the woodwork.

When I sit in the lobby and look around, I feel I'm lucky to be here because they don't build hotels like this anymore, with the level of detail in the ceiling, pillars, and elsewhere. So kudos to the ownership

group and the design team that kept the feel of it. They preserved even the most minor details.

The rooms here are smaller and cozier rooms, but it's New York City and that's what it's all about. They did a fantastic job of making them relevant and user-friendly.

When people are in New York, they're not in their rooms a lot. It's really about things like having a comfortable bed with the right bedding, as well as the right bath towels, and offering complimentary Internet that works well.

This property is attractive to Baby Boomers but I want to make sure it crosses over all of the generations, including Gen X and Gen Y.

When you come here in the afternoon from 4 PM onward, even when it's not theater matinee day, it's packed with a variety of individuals. You will see a woman writing with a glass of wine; you'll see some of the Gen Xers/Gen Yers working on their computers; you will see interviews going on – it's a neat feel and experience,

Also, 80 percent of our guests who take advantage of the lobby bar are not even hotel guests, so we get a great pull right from the street.

Who is The Algonquin guest?

It changes. During the week, we're a mix of leisure travelers, but the bulk is still the business travelers because of our convenient location. It's almost a 50/50 split right now.

Much of that is a result of our being a part of the Marriott portfolio. Fifty percent of our guests are Marriott Rewards members, so they have an active loyalty number that applies to their stay with us, which gives us a nice base.

Over the weekend, more people are here to explore New York City as leisure travelers – less than 10 percent are holdovers who are here for business.

While New York has always been a great destination, do you worry that there may soon be too much supply?

This could keep me up some nights, but one thing we have going for us is our prime location. We are one block away from Times Square – it's a quiet zone between Fifth and Sixth Avenues,



The Algonquin Hotel lobby

so one can get to all of the theaters quickly or get right to Fifth Avenue to shop, but we're on a street that has a calmer feel.

Almost 50 percent of the new supply is located within a 10-block radius of Times Square, so that's why excellent service is important, as well as having our rich history. We have associates who have been with us for more than 30 years and have great repeat guest recognition, which is hard to find in a city that is as nonstop and high occupancy as New York City.

It's critical to create relationships with guests so they keep coming back and to make sure we're getting better rankings online, which encourages Gen Yers to stay with us.

Has it become harder to anticipate bookings?

The booking window is smaller than it used to be. Ten years ago, everyone made their plans six weeks in advance and locked things down, and you didn't have much slippage.

Today, there is a much shorter window – five to 10 days, and we see customers that are actively looking at what rates other hotels are quoting and they will jump ship if they find a better rate.

We feel fortunate that we run such high occupancies. Last year, we did around 91 percent occupancy, but that was by design as we were focusing on our rate component at that time.

Our occupancies only swing from 3 to 5 percent, so it's not dramatic.

Is there such a thing as rate integrity today?

We're very focused on that with Marriott's Best Rate Guarantee and we get reports if any properties are not maintaining rate integrity. We want the customer to feel confident that what they see on Marriott.com will be the best rate.

What value do you anticipate that your association with the Autograph Collection will bring?

Their tagline is, "Exactly Like Nothing Else," and there is nothing else like this property. It was the first operating hotel in New York City and the first hotel that allowed single women to check in. There is such a rich history here that we try to incorporate into the experience for the guest. ●