

Hospitality



Passion for Peninsula

An Interview with Jonathan H. Crook,
General Manager, The Peninsula New York



The Peninsula New York lobby (left); Fifth Avenue Suite living area (above)

EDITORS' NOTE In April of 2011, Jonathan Crook was appointed to his current post. Previously, he had served as General Manager for The Peninsula Manila, Hotel Manager of The Peninsula Tokyo and Resident Manager of The Peninsula Beijing. He began his Peninsula career in North America within the food and beverage departments at Peninsula hotels in New York and Chicago. Before joining The Peninsula Hotels, Crook worked at the Dorchester



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London and other leading international hotels and resorts. He attended the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham, U.K., where he received a Higher National Diploma in Hotel and Institutional Management. He furthered his studies via the Executive Development Program with the Kellogg School of Management at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Harvard Business School.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Peninsula New York (newyork.peninsula.com) occupies an elegantly restored, 23-story, Beaux-Arts landmark building on Fifth Avenue in the heart of Manhattan's prestigious shopping, cultural and business neighborhoods. Featuring 235 rooms and suites equipped with state-of-the-art technology, a glass-enclosed spa and health club, rooftop bar and lounge, Salon de Ning, and the popular Clement restaurant, the property is the recipient of the AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five Star ratings. The Peninsula New York is owned and managed by The Peninsula Hotels (peninsula.com), a division of The Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels, Limited.

Where does the hospitality market in New York stand today?

Overall, New York remains buoyant and continues to see growth in visitors year over year. However, with significant growth in room inventory over the past five years, the environment remains extremely competitive. The focus for The Peninsula is to continue investing in improving the hotel and to focus on providing world class service to the discerning traveler.

In the midterm, we are looking to renovate the property to bring us in line with our newer hotel offerings as seen at The Peninsula Chicago, which relaunched its room product in 2017, The Peninsula Paris that opened in 2015, and our new properties currently under construction in London, Istanbul, and Yangon.

Is it more important to maintain rate or drive occupancy?

Within the luxury market, it is important to maintain rate in order to protect the services and expectations a guest should expect from a Five-Star hotel which, in turn, attracts certain operational costs. This is then carefully balanced throughout the year and adjusted to meet seasonal demands.

The turbulent geopolitical and economic climate remains a challenge to hoteliers and requires astute revenue management.

Do shrinking booking windows make forecasting more challenging?

The continued growth of online travel agents (OTA'S) and increased inventory in Manhattan continue to allow clients to shop for accommodations nearer to the date of travel. This, along with the traveler being more reluctant to book further out, does challenge hoteliers to accurately forecast. However, overall seasonal trends remain and with New York's unique global appeal, forecasting to some degree of accuracy is possible.

Are new players like Airbnb impacting the market at the high end?

Online disrupters such as OTA's have flourished at the expense of hotel margins and more recently this has been further challenged by online private accommodation aggregators such as Airbnb. As a city, New York is addressing the concerns Airbnb has brought on itself in operating within New York. Putting the governance concerns aside, we see this as not a threat but rather as an opportunity to teach us to become better at predicting the future, and how a small company like ours can focus on our ability to do what we do best, which is to provide unique and personalized guest services and experiences.

How important is it to maintain Peninsula's standards?

It is paramount that we do not cut back on our standards which will result in eroding the key principles of service and brand recognition that Peninsula Hotels have become renowned for. In doing so, this will not only tarnish the New York hotel but also the entire group.

How critical is it to have such a strong suite offering?

As a global gateway city, New York attracts an extremely wealthy traveler whose expectation is to stay at the city's finest hotels and to enjoy a

superb suite offering. To cater to this growing demand, The Peninsula New York launched the Fifth Avenue Suite just over a year ago to support our overall suite offering. This 2,500-square-foot one bedroom suite has already proven itself to surpass all financial projections.

To be a true luxury property today, do you need to offer a first-rate food and beverage product?

The Peninsula Hotels is a luxury operator and must remain consistent in its offering. A signature restaurant is core to any luxury hotel experience and hence the investment made several years ago in launching Clement restaurant at The Peninsula New York. Though each of our 10 key gateway cities offer many excellent dining options outside of our hotels, it is our belief that as luxury hoteliers we should not only provide a refuge within each of our properties for our own guests to dine, but also provide a "local" dining destination that connects to each of our communities.

How has your spa product evolved?

The New York market demands a variety of spa offerings both for its local clientele and our hotel guests. The Forbes Five Star Peninsula Spa offers internationally recognized brands such as ESpa, Biologique Recherche, Medical Beauty Research and Subtle Energies. Each of these products represent the evolution of the spa industry over the past 10 years, from the more holistic offering of ESpa to the medical/clinical offering of MBR.

How critical is it to communicate with your employees and engage them?

Highly developed channels of communication are important to a successfully operated hotel. Engagement of our team of 400 plus employees is vital to delivering and meeting guests expectations. As we celebrate 30 years of The Peninsula New York in 2018, we will have 19 staff members who have been with us throughout and we continue to see just over 60 percent of our guests being repeat clients. These facts alone point towards the strong commitment to The Peninsula name from both the guests point of view and the team members.

Is attracting the right talent more about education or cultural fit?

In recruiting new members of our staff, I believe strongly in finding talent who understand hospitality due to their family background or the environment they were brought up in that taught them the values of truly caring for individuals. If they can connect at that level, then the rest can be developed through training. ●