

Hospitality



Offering A Lifestyle

An Interview with Robert Festinger,
General Manager, Mondrian South Beach



Mondrian South Beach room with a balcony (left); pool (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Robert Festinger assumed his current post in 2016. A graduate of Hofstra University with a degree in economics and political science, he began his hospitality career in New York City in 1997 working at the prestigious Terrace on the Park followed by roles at Starwood Hotels. In 2008, he began serving as vice president and managing director of The Newport Beachside Hotel and Resort in Sunny Isles, Florida. Prior to accepting the position at Mondrian South Beach, Festinger was general manager at YVE Hotel Miami in downtown Miami where he won the prestigious Host Hotels and Resorts Strategic Innovation Award.



Robert Festinger

PROPERTY BRIEF Mondrian South Beach, which came under the management of Menin Hospitality in June of 2016, is one of Miami Beach's only bay-front hotel destinations. Built on a prime waterfront location with views of the bay, ocean and downtown, Mondrian South Beach (morganshotelgroup.com/mondrian/mondrian-south-beach) consists of 335 studios, one and two-bedroom apartments and penthouses. The Marcel Wanders designed property conceived of as a modern interpretation of Sleeping Beauty's castle combines the most exhilarating design elements of a fantasy modern getaway with all the comforts and conveniences of home. Facilities include GUYandGIRL®, a spa featuring wet and dry treatment rooms, a state-of-the-art gym, Mondrian Caffè, an outdoor lounge, chic event spaces and a private marina and dock.

How did you end up in the hospitality industry?

I was born into the industry. My father is a certified executive chef from Budapest – my grandfather and uncle were also chefs and all were European trained. This career was part of my DNA.

How has the general manager role evolved?

Those filling general manager roles generally came from operations with some experience in sales and marketing.

Today, the GM deals with every facet of the property and one needs to acclimate themselves. The general manager role predominantly has changed in terms of sales and marketing and, most of all, in terms of revenue management. Understanding it's a dynamic marketplace, general managers need to be extremely astute to how to

work with revenue management and sales and marketing side-by-side.

Is it hard to keep the focus on hospitality with these other pressures?

I always make time for our VIP guests and for our staff meetings where we go over our guest service index and discuss the apparatus of the hotel. It's about being a coach behind the scenes. It's also about being present in the public areas of the hotel. I take a few minutes in the morning to go into the restaurant and speak with guests, as well as at day's end

to greet guests who are checking in late.

How well understood is the Mondrian brand and how do you define what it stands for?

The brand is very well recognized. It has cache as we can see our direct bookings production. People believe that Mondrian offers a lifestyle. It's not only about an ergonomic guestroom with signature touches, but it's where one wants to belong. Anyone can feel wonderful at Mondrian and feel a connection to the property.

The consumers are being treated in a way here that they would not at a cookie-cutter property.

What is the positioning for Mondrian's South Beach property?

The property is positioned in the mid-tier luxury segment. Geographically, we are located on the other side of South Beach facing the bayfront rather than the ocean. Our pool and landscape, however, have been designated as a premier spot in South Beach and Miami. The Travel Channel accredited us as having one of the top hotel pools in the world.

Guests staying here also have easy access to areas like Brickell for business meetings and shopping.

How do you approach food and beverage and what are the keys to being successful in this area?

We avoid overcomplicating. We don't try to compete with all of the top restaurants. We need to offer quality and efficient room service, our beverages need to be innovative and unique to our venue, and we know that our breakfasts must be plentiful and have variety for all consumers. It's about making sure there is something for everyone's palate on our menus.

Our food and beverage program here is very strong. People enjoy the quality of the product and

let's not forget the 50-plus weddings we execute and the group business. Each group is custom-tailored to their specifications.

Will you discuss what you look for when it comes to bringing in talent?

It depends on the role. When it comes to my associates and some of our midlevel managers and supervisors, it's about the character of the individual and what they can offer us. Through our training program, we feel that we can teach the right person as long as they have the innate want.

How critical is it to have owners with a long-term view and a focus on continuous improvement at the property?

The owners look to us for our expertise, because we're not just representing Mondrian South Beach – we're representing the entire portfolio, so the relationship is vital.

It also requires understanding the owner's end game and their vision for the property. Ownership here leaves the day-to-day operations to us and sees the GM as the CEO.

With booking windows shortening, how difficult is forecasting?

We use our channels and monitor our history. We can look at determining factors to figure out where we stand going forward.

It's difficult, but we use all the tools in our arsenal to detect if there will be a shortfall, and we need to watch the seven-day window while also keeping our eyes on the longer-term windows. We also look at what the marketplace is doing. We're very dynamic in our ideology so we evaluate rates multiple times a day. It's vital to our success to make sure that we're pricing ourselves correctly and allowing enough of each segmentation to come into the property. Our revenue director is almost like a stock analyst – she's watching rates all the time

What advice do you give to young people looking to build careers in this industry?

It's extremely important that they have time and experience within all facets of the operation. I always tell them to ask questions. Do not be one of those individuals that come out of college and lose intellectual curiosity. They need to ask what the acronyms are. The more information they can gather early on, the better. Ultimately, those who don't ask are those who get left behind.

It's also important to understand how the financials come to fruition daily, how the accounting and IT works, and how to budget and forecast accordingly. Intellectual curiosity makes it easier for one to obtain what they need as a GM. ●