

Sharon Kilmartin: Taking tourism to a new level

BY ELSA FERNÁNDEZ MIRALLES
elsa@caribbeanbusinesspr.com

When Sharon Kilmartin was temporarily assigned the post of general manager of InterContinental San Juan Resort, Spa & Casino, the California-born hotel executive had no intention of staying longer than required.

But she wasn't counting on falling in love with Puerto Rico. "I was really impressed, especially with the genuine commitment to service that all employees in our industry have, which isn't learned from a manual but is sincere and from the heart."

Tourism industry employees, she added, "really want to show visitors a good time. That translates into wonderful memories for guests as they leave, prompting them to return and recommend the island to friends and relatives."

In May, these and other reasons convinced Kilmartin to officially accept the role as general manager of one of the most emblematic hotels in Isla Verde.

Trip Advisor, a leading website travelers use to obtain information about hotels around the world, has posted reviews and comments that place the InterContinental as one of the top two hotels in the Isla Verde sector.

Even after the high-tech advances in the industry in the last 20 years, Kilmartin believes word-of-mouth remains one of the best promotion mediums for a hotel.

Kilmartin is married to Holland-native and colleague Marcel van Rooijen. The couple has two sons, Paul (3½) and Will (2). Sharon describes her average day as pretty hectic. However, she loves every minute because she is devoted to her family and her career.

The secret to her success? "Always be 100% focused. When I'm at home or spending a day somewhere with my family, I'm totally committed. When I'm in the hotel, I'm 100% focused on the job I'm doing. That is the only way an executive woman can succeed nowadays."



Sharon Kilmartin, the new general manager of InterContinental San Juan Resort, Spa & Casino, is going green with various environmental initiatives and focusing on employee satisfaction.

Kilmartin entered the hospitality business by chance. She knew she wanted to work in something related to business and that she liked to travel a lot. But she wasn't clear which profession or specific field she would choose, until she accepted a job as front-desk agent in a hotel and discovered that the hospitality business was it. That's when she decided to study hospitality management, which she did at the University of San Francisco.

WIND ENERGY

After three years working in two different hotels, she entered the InterContinental chain, where she has worked for the past 17 years, mostly commuting from InterContinental's operations in London and the U.S. mainland.

She worked in InterContinental's most sophisticated five-star properties in London. What is the difference

between managing a five-star versus a four-star? "In every hotel I worked, regardless of how much the customer is paying or how many stars or diamonds the venue has, we treat him or her the same, with the same first-quality customer service."

Regarding the specific plans she has for the InterContinental San Juan Resort, Spa & Casino, Kilmartin includes several green initiatives designed to lower exorbitant energy costs and become environmentally friendly.

The hotel replaced all incandescent lights with fluorescent bulbs, and an in-house engineer makes sure the property is otherwise energy-efficient. Management gave fluorescent bulbs to employees to use at home to teach them how to be more efficient personally and professionally.

The hotel also installed a couple of wind towers on its roof in an effort to produce alternative energy.

"In the course of the next 12 months, we are changing our cooling and chilling system, which is 20 years old and not as efficient as the new equipment in the market. That should make a great difference in our energy bill," she said.

DISCOVERING CUSTOMER NEEDS

When asked how she can manage a 404-room hotel with 477 employees during these recessionary times and still make a profit, Kilmartin said: "It is always a matter of focusing on customer satisfaction, because that is the best publicity ever. Just look up the comments in Trip Advisor and we know what we are doing well and what we aren't."

To get customers hooked on the hotel, "we first make sure our employees feel satisfied and appreciated, and they will then achieve their goals. We take care of them, train them and teach them the six key objectives of their respective departments so everyone knows what they have to do to become a better person and employee. We also teach them how to balance their priorities in the workplace. Otherwise, an unhappy employee will not help with customers."

Other plans in the pipeline include completely remodeling the casino, relaunching the Alfredo restaurant in October and determining what customers want in entertainment options, because management is considering expanding the latter at the resort.

The hotel is exploring other ways of increasing revenue and cutting costs, which have grown significantly since last year.

When asked what has changed most in the industry in the past 20 years, she didn't hesitate: communication systems.

"Back when I started, reservations were done via fax or phone or over a very slow computer system. Now, we are connected 24/7, and people want answers and services immediately. So, we also have to address how to handle services more quickly and efficiently," she concluded. ■