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Hervé Houdré: A sustainable wake-up call

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Who has ever regretted not being rich or famous enough to positively impact major world health crisis such as cancer, malaria or AIDS; or vital environmental issues like deforestation or saving the oceans from the pollution that humankind produces on a daily basis?

Good morning, it is your wake-up call!



Hervé Houdré

The good news is that we do not need to be rich or famous to be and to do good. Each of us can be involved in helping the planet and its inhabitants improving their conditions for the good of future generations.

We can act in our personal life and help charities by donating our time, but more importantly, we can act in our professional lives as hoteliers. This is not an opportunity—it is our responsibility. Whether we work in a large urban hotel, in a resort on a remote island or in a corporate office, we must embrace what is defined as sustainable development, or Sustainable Hospitality. Other terms such as corporate (social) responsibility, sustainability and sustainable growth are sometimes used, but they all mean the same. So what is it all about?

Sustainable development is a holistic model based on a simple principle: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” as explained by a UN commission in the 1987 Brundtland report.

In the corporate world, sustainable development is applied via the triple bottom line equation, which was coined by John Elkington in the book *Cannibals with Forks* and comprises economic prosperity, social responsibility and environmental protection, or the three P's: profit, people and planet.

Why should hoteliers endorse such a strategy?

For two main reasons: The first one is due to the fact that hotels closely interact with their communities as they are large employers and usually welcome significant business from the community. On the environmental side, they consume a lot of energy and produce considerable waste.

The second reason relates to the evolution of the role of a hotelier: from the simple innkeeper of the 1970s; to the business person in the '80s; to the asset manager in the '90s; and now a hotelier must add two other bottom lines to the economic bottom line: social responsibility and environmental protection, thus creating a fourth generation: “the citizen hotelier.” However, one must be very clear: without a healthy economic bottom line, none of the other two will happen. Therefore, sustainable development projects must undergo a thorough ROI investigation.

Beyond “green”

It is important to stress that what is being described here is not simply “going green,” which is what we see every day in the media. The principle of Sustainable Hospitality is to offer a platform to all stakeholders that will make them think in a holistic manner about being profitable, a good corporate citizen and an environmental advocate.

Our industry is starting to wake-up to this approach, and all major hotel companies have now incorporated sustainable development in their strategy. There are still however, some serious barriers to entry due to the perception that stakeholders may have about it:

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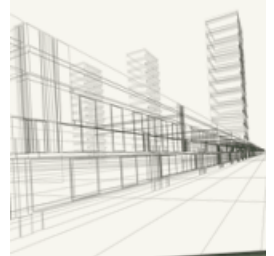
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-General managers and management companies: They are focused on the economic bottom line to satisfy the owners' and/or shareholders' expectations, and it is not always easy in this challenging economic and political environment.

-Employees: They are working hard to deliver a consistent service to their customers but do not see their workplace as a partner/coach to help develop them personally.

-Clients: They consider that they are paying enough not to be bothered by some hotel environmental initiative that would ask them to re-use their towels, for instance.

-Owners: They have the perception that it will cost more money and will take the management's focus off their business path, and they do not see the positive economic consequences.

It is important to understand that Sustainable Hospitality is a long journey, but it is one that does deliver profits. Some are short-term, but most of the initiatives offer a mid- to long-term ROI. However, like any long journey, it starts with the first step. Eventually it will deliver more business by developing the image of the hotel and the company in a positive way, attracting clients interested in being associated with sustainable hotels, and it will help saving costs by focusing on reducing the carbon footprint of the hotel.

It seems that we are at a stage similar to one which companies encountered 30 years ago when some would question the cost of doing training in a hotel.

The real question is... What is the cost of not doing it?

Hervé Houdré began his tenure as general manager of the Willard InterContinental Washington D.C. in 2004. He is recognized for introducing refinements which impact profit and increase market share. Under his leadership, the Willard InterContinental has embarked on a sustainability program, Willard InterContinental - The Next 100 Years. Houdré, who has written a white paper, Sustainable Hospitality© : Sustainable Development in the Hotel Industry, and his team, have put into place a five-year roadmap that defines and quantifies the mid-term SD goals for the hotel. The hotel published its first GRI Standard Sustainability Report available at www.willarddc.com/sd.

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