

Hotel Business®

INDUSTRY INSIDER

Q&A with John Oppenheimer Columbia Hospitality

By CJ Arlotta
Associate Editor

Keeping a business grounded with core values sets it apart in the hospitality industry, especially when finding quality associates is an ongoing problem for many management groups. Following well-thought-out principles often simplifies decision-making and prevents businesses from going off course. *Hotel Business* sat down with John Oppenheimer, CEO at Columbia Hospitality, to discover his hospitality management and consulting company's guiding values, uncover the secrets of negotiating hotel management agreements and gather advice for up-and-coming leaders in the industry.

You have degrees in political science and urban affairs. How did you end up making your way into this industry? I'm a huge believer in the value of a liberal arts education, which gives broad exposure to a wide variety of disciplines. At the University of Puget Sound, my degree in urban affairs helped me understand the importance of a sense of community, and political science is about communications, substance and relationships.

What does the consulting division of your company bring to your brand? It provides asset management, market analysis and peer reviews. Our belief is an operator can add straight forward, practical advice and guidance to any existing or potential properties we're involved in. The difference between a full-time consultant and an operator who is also a consultant is reality. As an operator, we bring that reality to our consulting assignments.

Finding quality associates has been an ongoing problem for many in the hospitality industry. Without revealing too much, what's your secret sauce? Our absolute top priority is our team. We look for enthusiasm, a sense of urgency and authenticity. The hospitality field is a spectacular industry and provides an opportunity to enrich and enhance people's lives, both among those who are employed, as

well as the guests who visit. Our secret sauce is all about having a great time while providing extraordinary service. For the right person, that's an ingredient for a great career.

The majority of the properties Columbia Hospitality manages are on the West Coast. Why does your company focus its efforts more along the Pacific Coast instead of the Atlantic Coast? We're interested in both coasts and have done a good deal of consulting in Portugal, as well. We tend to emphasize the West Coast because we're better known, but that shouldn't mean we're not interested in the right properties throughout the country.

How have you implemented technology to better assess each of your properties? We have just recently added reporting software in order to create management dashboards to evaluate the performance of our properties against comparable properties. These dashboards will allow us to "deep dive" into properties to maximize future performance.

Negotiating hotel management agreements—how has it evolved over the years? There must be give-and-take and, more importantly, it must be a win-win. We're big believers that the management company should be celebrating only when investors are celebrating.

What are key takeaways from deals you've made? Relationships, fit and culture. It's important that for any deals we make, those with whom we are working understand the priority we place on a sense of urgency and, always, absolute transparency. My feeling is our business isn't very complicated if you always follow your values. The values that serve as the litmus test for everything we do are enthusiasm, honesty, respect, sincerity, creativity and accountability. It's absolutely critical everyone involved is equally aligned when it comes to our values.

What do you have planned for the hospitality management company in



2017? We'll continue to grow in each area of hospitality, including hotels and conference centers, golf, special events venues and residential management. We're not looking to grow just for the sake of growing, but we are looking to grow with the right relationships that provide excellent synergy, success for investors and opportunities for our team members.

How do you manage work-life balance? With all the work you do, how do you avoid burnout? It's important to keep a perspective. While business is important, it's only business. Having a concentrated focus time with family and friends is what helps create a balance for people, which, in turn, leads to a more rounded life and a happier performer and team member. I believe if an individual is happy, it is transparent to our guests and colleagues. We are fortunate that many of us who work together are also friends, so it is a double bonus.

How does Columbia Hospitality give back? Giving back to the communities in which we operate is ingrained in our culture. We have a program called Columbia Cares. Semiannually, we invite all team members at our Seattle Support Center to suggest organizations with which we would like to become involved. We take a vote to select one organization, and all get involved.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give someone who has aspirations of running a hospitality management company? Allow yourself to have a great time, while always remembering the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated—and success will come.

If you could tell a younger version of yourself something, what would it be? Take risks. The only way to be sure something won't work is to not do it, so gamble, and always make decisions with a sense of urgency. **HB**