

Barnett on Business Travel: Fairmont manager pumps new life into San Francisco flagship hotel

by *Chris_Barnett*

The San Francisco Fairmont's new general manager is an old style hotelier with an up-to-the-nanosecond mind-set on how to treat travelers. Give them everything they want even if they have to pay for it, and emblaze your brand of hospitality in their brain so they never forget you.

"Businesspeople want recognition, speed, flexibility, security, choice, comfort food, generous beverages and fine dining when they have a meeting," says Tom Klein, a GQ kind of dresser with an Aussie drawl, with three decades of hotelling under his belt.

"Actually, our business hasn't changed since the days of (celebrated 19th century Swiss hotelier) Cesar Ritz. We provide shelter, a bed and pampering services."

Today, speed is tallied in minutes. The new GM of the stone 102-year-old, 591-room hotel atop Nob Hill (www.fairmont.com) "wants to speed up check-in from five minutes at point of arrival to three minutes."

How? Klein has staff in the "midst of updating" a guest file information to assure accuracy. Three to five days before arrival, a newly-hired guest auditor double-checks details, addresses, phone numbers, credit card numbers, personal preferences and other intelligence to shave time off check-in.

"A guest's top priority is to get into their room fast," adds Klein.

What's more, he also posts a "lobby ambassador" to roam around.

"This is nothing innovative," says Klein, "but when you have a manager approaching a guest and asking 'how can I help you?' that's aggressive hospitality and we practice it."

But does it forge a bond between hotel and customer like, say, reward points for frequent stays? Fairmont doesn't have its own point program. Their relationship and recognition-builder is the Fairmont President's Club with a no-charge membership and benefits that make it worth joining.

Here is what you get: a separate line and pre-registration, complementary shoe shine, gratis use of the fitness center (the hotel charges other guests \$15 a day), and no charge for Wi-Fi Internet access that Fairmont socks

other guests \$14 for 24 hours. Plus, the hotel chain has deals with 20 airlines and gives 500 to 1,000 airline miles per stay depending on your loyalty.

What you don't get? A private clubroom with food in the tradition of Ritz-Carlton, Hyatt and some Sheratons. Still, I found some Fairmont President's Club prices starting at \$149 a night. Currently, Fairmont's moderate rooms are fetching \$339 nightly.

Klein isn't an armchair general barking orders to staffers. At 5:30 a.m. daily - he lives in the hotel - he's prowling around with a broom looking for dust, dirt and dead light bulbs. He gets cracks patched up and repainted. Over coffee, he spied some torn fabric on a floor lamp and jotted it down on those little notebooks that general managers inevitably carry.

Fairmont's writing checks to spruce up its flagship hotel. All guest rooms have been renovated with better beds, Frette linens and 37-inch flat screen TVs. The Tonga Room and Hurricane Bar, (the thunder and lightning still strikes), Fairmont's version of a Trader Vic's, got a million dollar makeover including the a la carte Pacific Island style food and drink. Tonga's main fixture, a nightly buffet, is \$9.95.

A new three-way partnership between Ghirardelli chocolate, Illy coffee and Fairmont has created Caffe Cento near the corner of California and Powell Street, casual food with an Italian theme and its own door to the sidewalk. The high-ceiling, tall-pillared, ornately-gilded Laurel Court, a bar-restaurant off the lobby is getting the next makeover. Currently, it's home to plenty of business travelers, but AC plugs are scarce so juice up your batteries.

And not to be outdone by the newer, hipper hotels, Fairmont has gone green - collaborated with Lexus and produced an "eco chic" Hybrid Living Suite. Rate: \$869 a night and it includes a Lexus. Clever idea - no charge to any guest who parks a hybrid car in the downstairs lot where the overnight tariff is a stiff \$50.

Klein, who's also regional vice president for Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, came out of Hyatt Hotels "cutting edge" general managers factory of the late 70s, early 80s. Hyatt was a magnet for fiercely competitive hotel lords on the fast track, letting its best and brightest become gods with unrivaled power.

In a business plagued with egos, Klein generously salutes Hyatt co-workers who became competitors.

Horst Schultze, who went on to build Ritz-Carlton's reputation and cachet as its president, "truly understood service. He knew guests, employees and how to mix them to exceed their expectations. Stan Bromley, a terrific hotelier, who knows the classic hospitality traditions, went on to make his mark as a legendary general manager."

Besides Hyatt, Klein has run hotels or held senior posts for Raffles, Swissotel, Ritz Carlton (in Sydney), Movenpick Hotels in Africa, the Palace in Sun City, South Africa, and other hotels and resorts from Africa to Australia.

"You must hit all the senses so we put pecan pastries in restaurants for the aroma," says Klein. "A hotel must be spotlessly clean and fresh so we use fresh flowers everywhere.

"We're in the theatre business with a 'show' 24/7 so we make sure our actors are happy and our dressing room is inviting."

Translated: The staff dining room is getting a major modernization.

Every four to six weeks, Klein takes 20 employees into a meeting room and talks about problems.

"Within 48 hours, we get a solution to every problem," Klein claims.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

Â© Copley News Service

Barnett on Business Travel: Fairmont manager pumps new life into San Francisco flagship hotel by Chris_Barnett