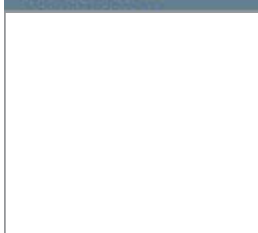


Standing Tall

11/1/2011 | by Marla Cimini



ACTIONS >>



There is a particular art to finding your own balance and rhythm in the hotel business, and for many women who are helping to shape the industry, it can be a complex, intriguing career path offering countless choices, alluring opportunities, and unexpected twists and turns—and often that's just in one day.

More than ever before, women are driving their own professions, whether they work on-property at an exotic five-star resort, own a small urban B&B, or hold a high-profile management position at a hotel chain's corporate headquarters.

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According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 60 percent of women work, and comprise over 46 percent of the overall labor force. In addition, females occupy 51 percent of managerial and professional jobs. By all accounts, females are a commanding presence in most industries, especially lodging.

Not surprisingly, several women's hotel industry groups have been introduced in the past decade. In fact, quite a few hotel companies now have internal networking groups, such as Kimpton's system-wide female employee networking organization, and the Hershey Entertainment & Resorts' initiative, Women in Leadership. In addition, some hotel organizations focus on enhancing the female traveler's experience, such as Wyndham's Women on their Way.

Nancy Johnson, executive vice president of development for Carlson Hotels and incoming chair of AH&LA, founded one of the more prominent associations, Women in Lodging (WIL) Connect, in 2003. Developed to encourage networking and education among female lodging professionals, the group has grown considerably over the years. Today, there are almost 1,200 members, with nearly 50 women on the executive council, which is comprised of the top-ranking females at a number of hotel companies. WIL has also expanded to 16 chapters across the United States (with 10 more in the pipeline), each offering special

events, activities, webinars, and a variety of informative programming for local members.

In addition, the organization established a mentorship program to positively influence the careers of women in the hospitality business. Membership is free to women (and men) employed at AH&LA member organizations. Most recently, WIL connects members online through social networking.

“When we established the council originally, its purpose was for women executives to serve as role models for students to see the hotel industry as a wonderful opportunity for a long career. And that is really happening,” Johnson says. “We are certainly seeing more women entering into this business today.”

Johnson is a firm believer in activism for women, and advocates reaching beyond the hotel industry.

“I feel very strongly about students and women in the hotel business staying active in their own communities—whether it be in politics or perhaps responsible neighborhood involvement,” she says. “We can make a difference in how our communities are run, and in the local and federal government as well.”

Kathryn Potter, senior vice president of marketing and communications at AH&LA, says she has seen a lot of relationships building within WIL. For instance, mid-level women are getting the chance to spend time with C-level executives. “I really feel like we are hitting our stride,” Potter says. “Year after year, we have seen an increase in membership, and it’s amazing how it’s all coming together. WIL has been great about attracting not only lodging industry professionals, but students as well. WIL is succeeding on both of those levels.”

Vail Brown is the vice president of global sales and marketing at STR (Smith Travel Research Inc.). As the chair of WIL’s executive board, she emphasizes the importance of women doing their best to meet career challenges, and staying open to new opportunities. “The biggest thing in life is always being open to trying something new,” she says. “Recently, my sales and marketing team came up with personal slogans, and mine is ‘willing to try.’ I’ve noticed that I discovered great opportunities in my career just because I was ready to try something new.

“Those new opportunities were all different from my normal role. Taking on those challenges have allowed me to get out of my comfort zone,” she continues. “I have personally grown, and opened my eyes to other elements of the industry. No one will ask you to do something that they don’t feel you could do. It’s a constant way to keep yourself competitive within your organization.”

Facing Challenges

Meeting challenges straight on has also been a theme in Adele Gutman’s career.

As the vice president of sales, marketing, and revenue of Manhattan-based HK Hotels, Gutman has been in the lodging business for more than 25 years, and never tires of the excitement that the industry offers. She and her team illustrate that careers with smaller hotels can frequently reap big rewards.

“What’s great about the industry is not only do you have the business side, but you also have a wonderful social element to it. It fills your life with some very beautiful and glamorous things that are fun to be around. It gives you exposure to all different kinds of people and it’s never the same,” Gutman says. “Every year, I learn something completely new. The job I have today is not at all like the job that I had 11 years ago, when I started with HK, because the environment that we do business in changes so much. It’s fulfilling to be constantly challenged.”

Taking Action

On property and off, the women in the lodging industry are making it a point to move away from simply discussing and planning their careers, to taking serious action.

And Stephanie Sonnabend is all about action. In addition to holding the post as the CEO and president of Sonesta Collection hotels, resorts, and cruises, she is the co-founder and chair of the non-profit organization 2020 Women on Board (along with executive director Malli Gero). Its mission is to educate everyone about the importance of appointing women to company boards of directors, and this group demonstrates that diversity matters in the business world. Extending beyond the hospitality world, this campaign was created to reach and educate all Fortune 1,000 companies.

Sonnabend feels very strongly about this campaign. “We are about action and getting people together, including men, who believe in this cause and want to do something about that,” Sonnabend says. “We encourage our supporters to do something—whether it’s congratulating our ‘winning’ companies, or actively try to get more supporters. We want to engage people and create a tipping point for change. When we are successful, companies will just naturally recognize that they need 20 percent women on their board, and that will be the definition of good corporate governance.”

Making Strides

Donna K. Holloway, Hershey Lodge’s executive assistant manager and rooms director, also supports women with high ambition. In 2005, Hershey Entertainment & Resorts launched its own initiative called Women In Leadership, focusing on mentoring, networking, professional growth programs, and sharing best practices. “Over the past two decades we have seen women making strides in the hospitality industry, as for quite some time they worked in positions of de facto leadership. Women currently constitute [nearly] half the total U.S.

workforce,” Holloway says. “Companies are recognizing that women need to be represented at the highest levels of the decision-making process, not only because it is equitable, but also because it’s important to gain women’s insights in developing and marketing products and services, and this is no different in the hospitality industry. Women are making their voices heard and their presence felt.”

The COO of Kimpton Hotels, Niki Leondakis, also agrees with this philosophy. “I think even more organizations will seek out and specifically target women, and that will increase over time, as companies realize that having a gender balance in leadership is actually more effective for the bottom line, and it’s more effective for creating collaborative work environments,” Leondakis says. “We will see companies looking for women to round out their teams.”

Many female road warriors may breathe a collective sigh of relief upon learning that female-friendly hotel companies are on the rise, and Kimpton is a prime example, as 50 percent of their guests are women. Kimpton promotes women internally as well. 50 percent of their salaried managers are women and 33 percent of employees who hold corporate positions are female.

“Women will be more comfortable being who they really are and bringing their whole selves to the business world,” Leondakis says, regarding future hotel industry trends. “We will see the hospitality industry evolve into providing more opportunities for women, regarding child care and job sharing, and becoming more competitive with other industries in order to retain female talent.”

Internally, Kimpton’s own company-wide women’s group has an active members-only Facebook community that virtually connects like-minded women in the company. These female employees across the United States can interact online, and easily share ideas, post learnings, and discuss the ever-present life-family-work balance issues.

Leondakis also mentions that a realistic view of one’s self is also essential. “Women need to be honest with themselves about what might be holding them back from achieving their optimal level of success,” she says. “Although gender can be an issue at times, it’s important to not default to that assumption, but to recognize there may be a skill you need to learn, an aspect of the industry you could become more knowledgeable about, or professional relationship that could help catapult you to the next level, and to be realistic about that self-assessment.”

Up and Coming

Women in the industry agree that today there are more interesting and attractive opportunities for younger women than ever before.

Megan Malone is the associate vice president of mergers and acquisitions at Kingdom Hotel Investments based in Dubai, UAE. She helped form the WIL New York City chapter, as well as the New York Under 30 Gateway chapter, which is an organization created by AH&LA to address the personal and professional needs of young hospitality professionals of both genders. Through events, resources, and networking, Gateway members build strategic relationships and receive top-level industry insight.

“For a young woman, I think the opportunities are endless,” Malone says. “We are starting to see women in every aspect of the hospitality industry from operations to ownership. Also, there are women stepping into more advisory and senior level positions that have traditionally been more male-dominated. Today, there are CEOs, CFOs, and more people who can guide your career.”

She advocates international travel for her younger peers, and has personally moved around quite a bit in her nomadic career on the financial side of the hotel business. She believes women will benefit from looking at the industry from a worldwide lens.

“You have to start asking for more responsibility and thinking of the business more strategically. I look at the skills needed for the job I want, and make sure I’m gaining those skills...you need to be proactive in managing your own career,” Malone says. “No matter what position you are in, start looking at your company from a global perspective.”

Karla Ikpi is another young and well-traveled individual with a passion for the hotel industry. A public relations professional with Wagstaff Worldwide, Ikpi believes that female-focused hotel industry organizations are very appealing and motivating to the under-30 set.

“I was happy to hear that the AH&LA created a special membership option for women because I truly believe that the hospitality industry is growing and there are more opportunities for women. Not only functional positions but also executive positions,” Ikpi says. “With an organization like WIL around, there are more opportunities for women to network together, learn from each other and help one another excel in their careers, while also paving the way for young professionals hoping to get started in the industry.”

A seasoned professional with an exuberant spirit, Lara Latture is the executive vice president and principal at The Hotel Group Holdings LLC. As the only female partner at her company, much of her 22 years has been spent learning every piece of the business, and she is often found on construction sites, as well as interacting with real estate and franchise representatives.

“The reality is that if you want to succeed in our industry, you have to work as

hard as everyone else. There is no great mystery,” Latture explains. “At times, I am the only female represented in the conference room...it doesn’t faze me. You need to be accepted as one of the gang, and at times it will be male-dominated, and you just need to figure out if that is something you can deal with.”

She recommends joining female-focused groups, and also suggests participation in co-ed business organizations.

Leondakis summarizes her perspective about raising the profile of female lodging executives and says, “It’s an outstanding place for women to succeed in their careers because, ultimately, we are serving a customer who wants to be cared for, welcomed, and made to feel comfortable while they are traveling.”

Johnson adds her own view of future trends. “The leadership role that women can play in this industry is just beginning to be tapped,” she says. “I think there are many opportunities for women to develop their own career roadmaps within the industry and influence the future.”

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