



CARIBBEAN
HOTEL & TOURISM
ASSOCIATION

CARIBBEAN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY EXCHANGE FORUM HEARS ABOUT IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING EXPERIENCE, SERVICE, CONNECTING VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (Oct. 3, 2015) – The excitement continued to build during the first full day of the inaugural Caribbean Hospitality Industry Exchange Forum (CHIEF) here with Gonzalo del Peon, president of AMResorts claiming: “It is very good to have the opportunity to discuss the region’s challenges with our colleagues. In many of our Caribbean nations the environment is dynamic and we must move quickly to minimize the challenges. We need to focus on concepts that are unique to the Caribbean to compete with the rest of the world.”

At the same time allied members populating the new trade show floor were very pleased with the attention they were getting despite the fact that most hoteliers were attending the packed seminar rooms to hear about best practices in operations, sales and marketing and going green.

Edward Weitz, longtime fabric, draperies and bedspread supplier, was very pleased with El Conquistador. “The property performed above and beyond expectations, the CHTA staff did a wonderful job, but I think most of the hoteliers came for the educational aspect and not the trade show.” However, he said he met more than a dozen potential new clients on the first day and added: “I will be back next year to wave the flag.”

The Opening General Session focused on a look at the future with emphasis on economics. Marla Dukharan, Group Economist for the Royal Bank of Canada, noted “The IMF (International Monetary Fund) says growth in the Caribbean will be slower this year but the U.S. dollar appreciated 12 percent and since most of the Caribbean is pegged to the dollar this will help those nations that get a lot of business from Europe and Canada.”

She added: “Most countries are highly indebted and so much money flows out of the country that we have to have the private sector spend funds to get the economy going.”

Gonzalo del Peon said that “I believe the Caribbean has a very attractive brand and I think there are a lot of opportunities that we don’t take advantage of in providing the experiences that our visitors are looking for.”

Greg Oates, Senior Editor of Skift, talked about the millennials and said “They are not going to wait to experience things. They want it now and they want unique and individual

experiences.” He added: “It’s not that the Caribbean does not have the experiences, it’s that it is not communicated.”

He also noted that “People are looking for more customized experiences and hotels need to target and define their markets.”

Karolin Troubetzkoy, Executive Director Anse Chastanet and Jade Mountain, added: “It concerns me that there is a perception that the Caribbean can’t provide good service.”

Fred Lounsberry, CEO of Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board, discussed online reputations in one of the first breakout sessions and said, “Responding to reviews online must be done quickly. You should have a plan and respond to both positive and negative reviews. Keep it brief and take any lengthy issues off line” noting “remember, everyone is reading what you say.”

Brian Payea, head of industry relations for TripAdvisor, told attendees to “Empower your staff to tell your story,” and noted that the new TripAdvisor instant booking mechanism works with hotel partners and reaches potential guests in 45 countries.

Sir Royston Hopkin, KCMG, Chairman and Managing Director of Spice Island Beach Resort in Grenada, said his whole emphasis is on service during a session on How Your Staff can Make or Break your Hotel. “If a guest leaves my hotel and says the experience was as expected, I have failed. If it is not above expectations I am not satisfied.”

He told attendees that providing exceptional service “is a team effort. I relate to the staff and the challenge is to establish the best service anywhere. I am on the ground with the staff and I create the environment which places a high value on the local staff. It is important to invest in and educate the local staff.”

In the session on Strategic Story Telling Richard Kahn, president of KTCpr explained that public relations had changed, but suggested that hoteliers can reach the media if they target the right media that can help generate sales. He suggested “hand-written addressed letters to break through the clutter as well as the need for a sustained social media campaign to reach both the media and consumers.

Karolin Troubetzkoy noted that “Story telling doesn’t stop when the guest arrives. There is post story engagement.”

Patrick Bennett, co-founder of Uncommon Caribbean, said that “Story telling is manipulation but if a story is good, people will share it.”

Sylvia Scholey, vice president sales and marketing for the Elegant Hotels Group, said “Successful story telling is making the emotional connection.” She also added that we “shouldn’t be afraid to use all ways to reach the customer because the customer is going to make their own decision on how to book their stay.”

Bevan Springer, President of Marketplace Excellence, encouraged attendees to promote the creative talent that is abundant in the Caribbean. He said: “Using a variety of communications tools, from print to multimedia, CHTA members ought to tell the stories of the region’s people who contribute to positive experiences for the millions of visitors who travel to the Caribbean.”

During a session on Social Media, all of the speakers referred to Instagram as the new focus for their online efforts noting that Facebook no longer has the wide attention it once had for marketers.

“Sanovnik Destang, Executive Director of Bay Gardens Resorts in St. Lucia, said “Travel is very visual and we use the platform that allows us to use photos such as Instagram.”

Adam Binder, Director of Sales and Marketing for Paradise Island Tourism Development Association, said “It is not the number of ‘likes’ it’s what you do with them in keeping them engaged. It’s managing the content.” He also told attendees to “pay attention to bloggers as they provide instant gratification before, during and after a visit to your hotel.”

Carmen Portela, CEO and Chief Social Media Strategist for Synapse Social Media, noted that most hotels are not using their WiFi to their advantage. “In most cases when the guest goes to the WiFi they end up on the hotel’s landing page. We changed it so they land on a page promoting the experiences available at the hotel.