

HOW TO BUILD A BRAND: AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY LIGHT

GLOBAL CHIEF BRANDS OFFICER FOR INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS

Formulating, building and growing your hotel brand is a task not for the faint of heart. It requires years of dedication to a singular purpose with broad strategies that affect all departments and operations from the ground floor all the way to the corporate oversight. Personally, I see the development of a strong brand as integral to a hotel's long-term success – whether that hotel is independent, semi-independent or part of a global enterprise.

It is with this gusto that I sought out Larry Light, the Global Chief Brands Officer for InterContinental Hotel Group to elaborate on his background, his reasons for entering the hotel industry and some of the moves he's made to help steer the massive ship that is IHG towards future branding success. As my background is in the marketing, branding and advertising fields, I was delighted to hear what he had to say.



Start with a few sentences on your background in branding and marketing as well as your past experiences in the field.

Over 20 years ago, I started a consulting practice focused on brand management. Our market segmentation strategy was to focus our practice on companies that were changing their business approach to a brand-preference building culture. Over the years, we also had the opportunity to work in situations where the challenge was to energize brands that were tired but could be revitalized. We have had the opportunity to work with a wide variety of companies on a diverse series of challenges. Over the years, we have worked in varying capacities with organizations such as Nissan, McDonald's, Conservation International and IHG. Prior to that, I worked in the advertising world at BBDO (Executive VP) and Ted Bates (President, International Division) after graduating from McGill University and receiving a PhD from Ohio State University.

What inspired you to work with IHG?

This was an opportunity to be involved in a very interesting industry – the hotel industry. When I arrived as a consultant I was struck by the warm and welcoming culture. And instead of cultural resistance, I experienced an organization very accepting of new approaches and ideas. As a result, I thought we would be able to accomplish a great deal in a short space of time. In this sense, I was correct.

Has working in other fields prepared you for hotel industry? If so, how has it helped?

First, the good news is that there are many issues that are industry agnostic. There are fundamental principles of modern marketing that apply to all situations. Certain marketing and business issues do not care which industry you are in, such as brand-building in a global organization; needs-based market segmentation; building strong brands; and measuring brand strength. So, being in the branding arena for decades has helped me here at IHG. In fact, experiencing the consistency of certain common principles and processes across a variety of industries and companies provides confidence that these ideas are robust.

Second, working at franchise restaurant organizations such as Applebee's, McDonald's, KFC and Invisible Fence as well as in the automotive world with Renault, Ford, GM, Nissan and the auto dealer network, DCH, have been truly instructive. Franchise organizations require skills that go beyond normal marketing challenges.

And third, it is very valuable to have had experience in a service business. I have worked with service organizations in the financial, restaurant and retail worlds. When you work exclusively in package goods, you forget that in service the brand experience is manufactured at the point of sale, not in a factory.



The year of 2012 saw many brand expansions for IHG such as Hotel Indigo, Holiday Inn Express, Even Hotels and Hualuxe. Care to elaborate on how you've managed during this transition period?

There are two distinct points here in your questions. First, the brand propositions for the Hotel Indigo brand and the Holiday Inn Express brand were already established when I arrived. I would love to take credit for these wonderful brands. However, I cannot. My role has been to refine, but not re-invent these brands.

As for Hualuxe Hotels & Resorts and EVEN Hotels, again, when I arrived these brands were beyond the ideation phase; the heavy lifting on the concepts, the experiences and the development all were close to completion. However, I have participated in discussions about refining the final deliverables. I also brought some brand discipline to how we properly articulate these brands.

So, what strategies have you championed and ideated since joining IHG?

IHG is institutionalizing some very important new ideas. IHG is aligned behind an overarching goal of building brands that are preferred by guests and by owners. This simple statement is having a huge impact in how we allocate our resources, how we build our strategies, how we organize worldwide and how we measure progress.

We changed the roles and responsibilities of global and regional marketing. We eliminated the title of Global Brand Manager; ultimately, brand management happens at the hotel level. So, our global brand people are now Brand Leaders. Our function is defined as Brand Leadership Marketing. In this new world, the global leadership team defines the brand ambition and the overall framework within which the ambition will be realized. The local brand leaders refine and activate the brand strategy to assure local relevance. Our process is a collaborative approach that eliminates the top-down or bottom-up planning approaches to global marketing. It is a joint plan, jointly developed.

Who is the Brand Manager, you ask? We have instituted a program that identifies the hotel General Manager as the ultimate Brand Manager. Who better to understand the brand and the brand's guests at the local, hotel level than the General Manager and the hotel staff?

Very true. Any IHG branding plans for near future that you care to share with us?

Last year, the focus was on organizational, process and cultural change. It was quite the year. This year our focus is on the institutionalization of these changes. Our goal is to bring our new ways of thinking and managing into the veins and brains of the organization worldwide.

What do you believe is at the core of a 'good' brand?

At IHG, we are not looking to build good brands. Good enough is not good enough: our aim is strong brands that are the first choice of our guests and our owners. We are all aligned, the company and the franchisees around building preferred brands. Whatever we do, we do with this single-minded goal in view. Brand preference is built on a foundation of four basic principles: consistent brand identity; familiarity; relevant and differentiating promise; and trust.

To close, a job at your level can often include a lot of worldwide travel. How do you balance work and home life?

This is definitely a challenge. In a global marketing world, travel is not an option; it is an imperative. There is no substitute for face-to-face interactions with the local world including local owners, local hotel managers, local guests, visiting local hotels (ours and competitors), meeting with local employees, discussing local challenges and socializing locally. Email, Skype or conference calls cannot accomplish this.

I love my present career experience. On the other hand, it is important to balance work and home life. My goal is to be home every single weekend, wherever in the world I may be during the week. To adjust my mind, I withdraw from the everyday pressures by escaping on my boat, whether fishing or cruising or visiting various islands