

# The Power of Independents

What's a common thread with Hotel Plaza Athena New York, Hotel Valley Ho Scottsdale, St James Hotel & Club London, Hotel Bel-Ami Paris, Lodge at Pebble Beach, Talbott Hotel Chicago, Hotel 1000 Seattle, Hutton Hotel Nashville, Shangri-La Santa Monica, and the Montage Deer Valley?

The short answer is they understand that no matter how great their individual hotel name is, their hotel name is even more distinguishable with a supporting title. That's right, these hotels, some of them we may even view as legendary hotels, have teamed up with an endorsement brand. Some may call endorsement brands an alliance, or soft brand, brand membership, or brand affiliation. One of the main benefits of an endorsement is to help raise the hotel's name to an even higher level of recognition, quality, prestige, and credibility to the traveler (and in some cases even the competitor). Endorsements attached to a hotel name can help take the guess-work out of a traveler's selection of a hotel in unfamiliar cities and destinations as well as accentuate the hotel in an overcrowded hyper-competitive market.



Hotel Shangri-La Santa Monica  
Small Luxury Hotels of the World



Plaza Athenee, New York  
One of the Leading Hotels Plaza of the World

As the hotel business continues to be more and more competitive on every aspect and as some of the big chain commodities shuffle in new twists of old brand clutter, independent hotels can and do get lost in the tweets-texts-likes and reward-points in many hotel choices. Managers and owners, of hotels in all sizes, often ask, "how do we get the hotel better noticed by travelers - in our congested city location or at our exotic beach." Whether a unique standalone hotel or a hotel within a noteworthy hotel management company, whether competing in the market for many years or a new build (even prior opening), finding ways of bringing the special features of your hotel to potential guests that are inundated by the marketing machines of chain hotels is a battle many owners have been dealing with for years. Worse yet, many hotel owners keep doing the same things over and over and can't understand why their special hotel is not noticed by all of those travelers scouring the market for something more than another ordinary night in their city.

Over the years, that described situation has been lived first hand on several occasions by veteran hotelier Steven Andre, General Manager of Nashville's stylish Hutton Hotel. "For the independent up-market property, getting a spotlight on the hotel's name by local or international audiences, while competing in an industry dominated by the resources of mega-chain money, can be very expensive and consume extraordinary amounts of time. At the same time, it seems like a high percentage of travelers are clawing their way through the daily barrage of commodity hotel branding and searching through their favorite sources in hopes to find an independent hotel proposing a better or more interesting element to their trip, such as we strive for at the Hutton Hotel Nashville".

The Goliath brands may say they have the answer to these competitive struggles. Whichever of the big boys come to mind, throwing in the towel and hoping everything is solved by a homogenous product might feel like the simplest future for an owner. However, ask yourself if ordinary names fit your vision and maximize the opportunity in your market. If not, let's review some realistic options?



Montage Deer Valley, Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide

Put the royalty fees (even if you may be paying their costs for the search position results) and austere (or nonsensical) hard brand standards aside. If you are an owner, or manager, who wants to take your vision of an exceptional hotel to the customer, and not be commanded to buy a certain hallway sconce that has been scientifically analyzed to be favored by the average middle-aged typical business traveler, several endorsement brands or brand alliance groups are available at different levels (pseudo three-four-five star,

luxury, golf, resort, spa, etc.) along with differing membership conditions and joining criteria, to assist you in fulfilling your vision while also lightening the restrictions on maximizing your profit potentials.

However, before you even consider an endorsement, one of the first things to do is be realistic with yourself about what your hotel product (unquestionably) is and what your (genuine) selling points really are. Is your hotel really driven by design, coolness, elegance, luxury, small, large, leading, gastronomic, meetings or business, sophisticated, simplistic, economical, green, rainbow, resort-diculous, or spa-tacular, and so on. Once the hotel's position is undisputable, along with a few other basics clearly defined, you will have a straight line to matching an endorsement brand that helps travelers better identify what your hotel is promising.



Hutton Hotel Nashville  
One of the Leading Hotels of the World  
consider a brand membership'. The thinking should no longer be, 'my hotel is too unique to group or brand endorsement best suits my hotel and my potential customers?' What group best pursues and maintains our mutual customers?' and 'How do I find the right endorsement partner for my hotel?'

Also in the top five things to do, assess the amount of participation you want your hotel to partake with the endorsement brand. Do you want a provider that is one dimensional or do you insist on working with a group that your hotel can be fully active in and leverage the strength of its members. Andre notes that a hotel owner should find, or get assistance in finding, an endorsement brand that is also an alliance for complimenting hotels to leverage their individual efforts.

Is an endorsement brand and or an alliance right for you and your hotel? As networks evolve and potential customers communicate more rapidly, you may want to consider modern day behaviors in light of any hotel owner you may know that experienced ego driven righteousness. It has become evident that companies cannot afford to be seen as working in opposition to collaborations or they will risk offending their customers.

Independent companies are joining endorsement brands or forming alliances, cooperatives, networks, and coalitions in record numbers. Coming together in groups of 10,20 or 200, smaller hotel companies are gaining the benefits of largeness. It's happening all over the place. From prominent universities (Big 10-11-12-13-14) to farmers (Wisc Dairy Coop) to airlines (Sky Team) to small, medium, and large hotels (ala Global Hotel Alliance), individual efforts are joining together for a common goal. The movement has no borders and reaches across all continents.

Participating in group efforts is an increasingly vital path to accelerate growth, access new customers and tap new markets, and fundamentally sound business economics. The thinking should no longer be, 'my hotel is too unique to group or brand endorsement best suits my hotel and my potential customers?' What group best pursues and maintains our mutual customers?' and 'How do I find the right endorsement partner for my hotel?'



Bel Ami Hotel Paris  
Member of Design Hotels

By now I'm sure many are impatiently asking - but what is my return on cost.

Before signing on the dotted line make sure your specific questions receive written definitive answers and then it is easy to measure your return on cost. Some of the endorsement brands are better at marketing to hotels than they are at marketing to travelers. It should be a relationship that compliments both parties. Driving down La Cienega Blvd the other day and seeing all those coffee shops I wondered.... would some of these a coffee shops with an endorsement have more guests at their fine establishment instead of the coffee shop across the street with the well-known green mermaid sign? Small Luxury Coffee Shop, Preferred Coffee Shop, Luxe Coffee Shop, Design Coffee Shop, or one of the Leading Coffee Shops of the World, all sound more appealing, don't they?

The choice and the quality of endorsement brands is incessantly on the increase. And the winner of this ongoing competition is of course, the guest that visits your hotel, finally.

*John Sears is a partner with Boutique Hotel Advisors, a resource for independent hotel owners and operators to make better informed decisions. John visits over 200 hotels a year and has worked with hotel members of Leading, Design, Small Luxury, Preferred, Prestige, Luxe, Epoque, Great Hotels, World Hotels, Grand Heritage, Relais et Chateaux, Concorde, Exclusive, Luxury Collection, Luxury Lifestyle, Romantik Hotels, Warwick, Aqua Vista, XO Private Collection, Elegant Hotel Collection, among others.*