

# Influencers in Hospitality

**Influencers in Hospitality** is a regular RLA Q&A with movers and shakers of the hospitality world, providing enlightening industry perspectives whilst sharing some personal traits that have made them successful.

Marco P. Nijhof is currently Director of Hospitality & Guest Experience for Value Retail, a Retail Management company that manages 11 retail villages world-wide. Formerly Marco was Sr. Vice President of Jumeirah, CEO and Founder of YOO Hotels together with Philippe Starck & John Hitchcox, and he worked for His Highness the Aga Khan as Director of Operations and Development for Serena Hotels.

## **RLA: Is there a particular skill or attribute that has helped you in your professional life?**

MPN: The biggest thing I learned from having worked in 22 different countries is “respect”. That is the only way you are able to communicate and become effective in different social and educational systems, work & business environments. In addition, I think tenacity is very important for a ‘never give up’ attitude, and language skills are essential to be able to communicate effectively with your clients, owners and developers, colleagues, guests.

## **RLA: How do you keep all stakeholders, particularly owners and investors happy?**

MPN: The first thing I have always done was trying to understand why the owner, developer, person or company has built the hotel in the first place. By having a clear answer to this question, you are in a better position to run the hotel successfully, knowing what outcome is ‘the’ expectation. An asset is differently run if you want to ‘flip’ the hotel than if it is owned for the benefit of the next generation, or if it forms part of an asset group. The financial results or the achieved position in the market place or the market share, etc. should give you results the owner wants.

## **RLA: As an industry what should we stop or start doing?**

MPN: Start believing that as an industry we have to embrace big data more and faster. The market is changing so fast with newer technologies and different guest profiles, habits, likes and most importantly purchase behaviors, and I think our industry is too slow to adapt. Retail and private banking are way ahead of us.

## **RLA: In the next decade or two, what do you foresee changing about the Hotel Guest Experience?**

MPN: Customization of the guest experience, the room and most importantly: the desire to eat healthier and live a more ‘mindful’ life.

## **RLA: And what should change for an enhanced guest experience?**

MPN: Start to engage with our guests more meaningfully. A pillow menu or a preferred music will not do any more. I stayed in a hotel in Oxfordshire the other day, and there they have a team of 8 people who do nothing more but ‘to connect’ with their guests. On top of this, the hotel was relatively small. Amazing rapport has been created, relationship between guests and hotel staff became very close, allowing the business to make changes in their service, product, meals, communications very quickly. Within a week they were able to change menus and/or dishes world-wide, based on repeated comments.

## **RLA: During your long career in how many hotel developments and operations have you been involved, and which country was the most complicated hotel operation?**

MPN: “Our Lucaya Beach and Gold Resort” in the Bahamas with 1,250 rooms was one of the most complicated developments in my career. Not only did we have to develop a hotel ‘and’ build a destination (Grand Bahama Island) but also manage airlift, as there were not enough seats into the island to fill up all 1.250 rooms. We took a 6,000,000 US\$ risk in leasing airplane seats from different destinations to increase seat capacity. On the island



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we created a new management philosophy and even a language to engage with our guests. We worked with TMI and the Zimmerman PR & Marketing to create a management philosophy based on how the Bahamians lived and welcomed guests centuries ago. We created a council of Caciques (not my direct reports, but colleagues who were exceptional) that became the shadow cabinet for the Executive Team. Through them we were able to communicate a guest focus approach to the business. One of the things we introduced was a greeting; “Morning, Morning”. That was the way that Bahamians on Grand Bahama Island greeted each other. I went back to resort 15 years later and saw a T-shirt with these words written on it. It is a lasting differentiation.

**RLA: You are now working in the retail industry. What has been the most noticeable difference between working in the hotel and retail business?**

MPN: The retail industry moves about 10 times faster. A leisure asset has to reinvent itself maybe once every 7 years, if at all. The retail business has to reinvent itself every 3 months!!! In addition, the use of social media based on big data trends is evident, and the retail industry reacts much faster. You clearly see that if a retail brand DOES NOT react, they are out of business or become irrelevant very quickly.

**RLA: What approach or thinking could the hotel industry learn from this?**

MPN: The hotel industry or a leisure asset should think about its current or future relevancy much more often. We take ourselves for granted too much and we do not think critically about our current business and or our business 5 years from now. 25% of our guests are Millennials today, but within 5 years this could be 50% - and how has the hotel business changed based on this fact???

**RLA: What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?**

MPN: Do not let your ego get in the way. “Ego” you leave at the door step of your business (outside that is) otherwise it will start interfering with your business. I always say to owners: “Do not fall in love with your business”.



Roger Allen, RLA Group CEO and Marco Nijhof at a recent company board meeting

**RLA: In our industry where can we find additional or hidden value?**

MPN: Down in my heart I am a hotelier, but I think we should start looking at our business as a real estate business that drives values, and the way we do this is through the creation of experiences in hotels, or spas or clubs. Once we have the experience part done properly, the revenues will follow and the subsequent asset value as well.

**RLA: What is the most unusual thing you’ve had to do to “make it work”?**

MPN: I think the most unusual thing I have ever had to deal with was: “as to how can you superimpose a hotel business onto a retail business”. This required me to reinvent myself as a guest focussed executive that used the retail business model to create hotel experiences.