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Our 20th Year **mpg**

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in this issue...

Quick-read interviews,
condensed articles,
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and *great* venues

The guide for *busy* meeting professionals



the hotelier



Sonny Sra

Put your faith in your people

SONNY SRA is senior vice president of Remington, a Dallas-based independent hotel management company.

How did you get into the business?

In 1973, I came to this country to get an MBA. I was 20 years old and had finished my schooling back home (in India) with an undergraduate degree in Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics, specializing in metallurgy. My family owned a steel mill and it was my plan to return and join the family business. Somewhere along the way I fell in love, got married, and as the adage goes “man plans and God laughs.”

To support myself during grad school someone told me that a hotel night auditor is a great job for students so I joined the Sheraton in Savannah, Georgia and, from day one, I fell in love with the hotel business.

With your background in physics, chemistry and mathematics, what were your initial thoughts about the hotel business?

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to operate a hotel. It does require lots of common sense, especially *people* sense.

What came next?

I finished my MBA in 1977. The company

that owned the Sheraton liked me and one of their subsidiaries hired me.

My job was to negotiate leases for restaurants, gas stations, whatever it took to develop a robust highway interchange and that included hotels. One interchange in Savannah was developed and timed so that when the I-95 was completed, the new hotels would be in place. As luck would have it, the hotels were finished before the highway. Since our company owned the land, my boss called me and asked me to take over these two hotels. I told him that my experience was very limited but he said, “You have more hotel experience than I do.” So, at the age of 24, I was managing two distressed hotels.

I was young and didn't approach my job in a traditional way. We hired some top chefs and provided a level of service way above the typical roadside property. I convinced our company to mandate that their traveling employees stay at my hotels and, because of the great service, they loved it.

What did you learn from this experience?

I learned that before anything else, you must fix your people problems first.

This business is repetitive – checking in

guests – making beds. The challenge is keeping people interested, motivated, and making sure they have a stake in it. I also learned that mentoring is really no more than believing in someone.

What are your thoughts about leadership vs. management?

Some people are leaders and some are managers. You need managers to manage events, profit plans and budgets but you never, ever manage *people*.

For example, a computer key can be hit softly or with anger and, either way, it works the same. With people, it is never the message, it is how your message is *delivered*. With people, you lead and leadership means getting to know your people.

What about the experience of traveling?

Traveling today is totally impersonal... nobody cares who you are. It starts at the airport - stand in this line, open this bag, find your seat and shut up. Then, you are in new city and nobody knows or cares what brought you to that city - a happy occasion, a sad occasion, a pressure-packed occasion.

After spending a day like that, these weary travelers show up at our doorstep. We can either defuse them by saying "Mr. Smith, *welcome*, it's good to see you again. We've been expecting you." Or, we can show the same indifference as everyone else. Unfortunately, over the years the hospitality part of our business has been shrinking and the business part has been expanding.

The relationship with our customers has been reduced to a "plastic" relationship. As long as they hand you plastic that is not declined, you're happy, and as long as you hand them plastic that opens their door, they're happy.

Our industry's biggest challenge is how to put hospitality back into the hospitality business.

What do you recommend?

Put your faith in your people and take care of them. That's leadership.

Tell us about your hotel in Clear Lake that was impacted by Hurricane Ike.

Remington has hotels all over the U.S., some in hurricane-prone Florida, so we have experience dealing with major storms.

Our company's basic philosophy is that when a storm hits, we are going to keep these hotels open. In many cases, hotels are the shelters of last resort.

Our Hilton Houston Nassau Bay was constantly on the news during the hurricane. It received damage to the lobby and exterior, but before Ike passed Houston, two tractor trailers arrived with emergency generators and the equipment they needed to secure the hotel. Remington's president, Mark Sharkey, was on the phone with the hotel's GM and the property team all weekend. His idea was whatever comes we will keep this place open.

What short-term factors are most affecting this industry?

First and foremost is this unparalleled economic situation. It's one blow after another and I'm not quite sure it's all over yet.

Next is the issue of airline capacity. Airlines have shrunk their capacity by 10% and it seems like their new mantra is to reduce their fleet size and increase prices so that they can make the same amount of money with lower expenses.

Finally, the problem is that it is no longer just *our* problem. The world is intertwined. It is evolving into a global economy which will have its own rewards, but it will take time for us to understand what it is and how to take advantage of it.

In the long run, I'm confident that everything will work out - it always has and it always will. I think the next couple of years will be tough but after a while, new industries will start. This is the biggest economy in the world and it's filled with ingenuity. In the end, the people who will thrive are the ones that really understand the basics of this business – *people and relationships*. ✨