

Profiles

McNeill Hotel Company refocuses on staff, sales efforts

10 DECEMBER 2020 8:32 AM

To navigate the coronavirus pandemic, owner/operator McNeill Hotel Company renewed its efforts in supporting employees and focusing on its sales team to bring in business.



By **Bryan Wroten**

bwroten@hotelnewsnow.com

@HNN_Bryan

GERMANTOWN, Tennessee—Over a course of 14 months, McNeill Hotel Company grew its portfolio from 16 hotels to 25. That growth, combined with the coronavirus pandemic this year, led the company’s leadership to make sure employees were receiving enough support.

“We have a company policy of people serving people,” President and COO Mark Ricketts said. “That really forced us to go back in and really underscore that. We need to reach out.”

McNeill operates a portfolio of Marriott International-, Hilton- and Hyatt Hotels Corporation-branded select-service and extended-stay hotels primarily in secondary markets in Texas as well as the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. The company has recently started moving into the Midwest and Mountain West regions.

Focusing on employees

A few weeks before the pandemic began in the U.S., McNeill held a leadership conference where they discussed going back to basics and focusing on the fundamentals of hospitality, Ricketts said.

After the pandemic started, the company held 45-minute calls each Friday with the sales teams for each of its hotels, Ricketts said. To share the spotlight, they would rotate who got to speak, picking four to five hotel teams for each call. They call out top performers, play music and pump each other up.

“Everyone got to brag on their own hotel, and it’s continued on eight months into the pandemic,” he said. “Everyone gets excited on Friday afternoon to participate.”

Along with boosting morale, the calls allow them to share ideas, develop revenue management strategies and discuss e-commerce, he said.

Though the company did have to cut on-property staff, funding through the CARES Act’s Paycheck Protection Program allowed the company to bring almost everyone back. The company had to act fast to apply for the funds as there was a lot of competition in the program, said Anne Rench, VP of asset management and acquisitions.

McNeill made some changes to its management structure, Ricketts said. They had positions overseeing 12 or 13 hotels each, which they transitioned to having area GMs in charge of four to five hotels. That made it easier on managers because it meant they could drive to these properties in a time when air travel was frowned upon.

The reorganization also created opportunities to develop more talent, he said. The company’s executives prefer to promote people within the company first, and by having more managerial positions opened, employees had more chances to advance their careers.

“They were able to have conversations, work with the properties and provide tutelage and educational pieces as well,” he said.

The company’s new management training program helped employees see there is a career path within hospitality, he said.

“A lot of people say, ‘I just want to work for a while until I get my next job,’” he said. “By doing this, we’ve been able to show, ‘Hey, you do have a career path in hospitality. You can make a living, and there’s no end in sight (for) how far you can go up.’”

Following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the protests that followed, the company enhanced its diversity council, Ricketts said. The council now has 13 members comprising different races and ethnicities and includes people with disabilities. The company has held online town halls and gotten important feedback from employees.

“We’re trying to let people voice their concerns,” he said. “It’s not going to be the most pleasant conversations, but we need to listen and use that to improve our company and improve our culture.”

Chasing demand

Company leadership decided it would keep the on-property executive teams even if they had to let go of other employees, Ricketts said. Having the hotels’ leaders in place meant they had people who could provide answers for potential guests. That meant they didn’t have to refer calls up to the brands, something their competitors who made more drastic cuts had to do.

“We had real life people that could talk and follow back up,” he said. “Because of that, we got three to four groups by the end of March that were providing 50 to 60 a night for our extended-stay hotels.”

The sales teams underwent some new training and are working with new initiatives and programs, Rench said. There’s a sales training library and a new internal referral program to help teams work together. One of the new programs has been about giving virtual presentations on their hotels to prospective guests through online meetings.

“It has been really a huge success for the hotels that have gone through that course,” she said. “We’re continuing to have more sales team members sign up for that training.”

The training has also reinforced having the hotel staff reach out to guests ahead of their stays to talk about how they are looking forward to the group arriving and going over the cleanliness and safety practices, Ricketts said.

The Friday sales calls have also helped hotel teams connect each other with potential guests, including a U.S. National Guard group, he said.

Many of the hotels in the portfolio are located near sports facilities, such as a sports park in Indianapolis and a soccer complex in Memphis, Tennessee, which drove in business starting in July, he said.

Some of the business came from going out and finding demand from the areas around the hotels, Ricketts said. One hotel’s director of sales did a parking lot tour and found a construction group sitting around a parking lot drinking beer. The director of sales bought them pizza and asked what it would take to get the group to stay at her hotel. The move paid off and the group stayed for six weeks.

“Going back to the old school ways of just driving around parking lots and if somebody has a car or a truck with a name on it, writing that down and then going back and trying to find out what was happening and going from there,” he said.

**Correction, 10 December 2020: This story has been updated to correct the company’s categorization.*