



A Conversation with James

TRANSCRIPT: Robert Gaymer-Jones Tells James Berkeley Why Empowering People Is Key To Sofitel's Ambitious Growth

Today in *A Conversation with James*, James Berkeley talked to [Robert Gaymer-Jones](#) Chief Executive Officer at Sofitel. He is repositioning the Company and expanding Sofitel's global footprint at breathtaking speed. We talked in-person and over the phone over the past six months. We talk about THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING BRAND EQUITY, ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE AND PROFITABLE GROWTH IN AN AMBITIOUS FRENCH COMPANY.

Published: Monday, 1 Aug 2011 | 11:00 AM GMT



JAMES BERKELEY, HOST: Thank you for joining me today.

How is business in this upswing?

ROBERT GAYMER-JONES, CEO SOFITEL: We have successfully completed a corporate and regional restructuring process with extremely positive internal support from our General Managers and employees. Our next challenge is avoidance of any "cost creep" as demand and RevPAR improve in key markets and determining how you achieve as much rate and occupancy as possible. Tactically that means maintaining a "crisis mentality and the same level of cost focus while re-deploying sales

resource, energy and time to key account management. Our investment focus has moved to talent development supporting our planned growth goals (125 managed properties by 2013).

BERKELEY: Hiring and developing people, how big a priority is this for you now compared to last year? What can we expect to see from your firm over the next 12 months?

GAYMER-JONES: 9 out of 10 issue, right now, probably, a 5 out of 10 issue, 12 months ago. We have been hunkering down, maintaining the strength and continuity of our customer and client facing teams. I am pleased to report our guest satisfaction results suggest we are on the right track.

It is true that we are going through a period of “back-filling” General Manager and senior leadership positions. One noticeable change is that we are growing our talent pool significantly from outside hires. We are also immersing our Department Heads in an extensive training programme.

How, specifically, will the operation be different when we’re done? Firstly, there is a demonstrable improvement in individual, team, and hotel operating performance. Secondly, there is strong anecdotal evidence showing that the new entrepreneurial working environment is stimulating creative ways of thinking. Thirdly, our managers are able to quickly adapt their skills and their new approaches to greater effect with less need for management intervention or duplication of effort.

We are launching our new “Sofitel Ambassador” programme. Every employee is undergoing a programme of training and development, leading to a certification of a “Sofitel Ambassador”. Success will be measured against our current key performance indicators, the ease of setting up the programme, the quantum and speed of accreditation, and the outcomes of our training programme on attainment of our key business goals. Getting the funding right is critical to the programme’s success, the creation of valued employees, and our retention ratios.

BERKELEY: The fastest, surest route to loyal and “permanent” customers and clients is with fulfilled employees offering great service. In your view where should hotel chains and property owners be directing time and money now to maximise that employee fulfilment, and *really* exploit an economic upturn?

GAYMER-JONES: I wholeheartedly agree with that statement. What are we doing? Well, I have talked earlier about our investments in more effective customer acquisition, sales training, and the “Ambassador” programme to meet the requirements of the brand. It is our belief that prioritising time and money towards our employees’ development will answer many of the questions about how do we create a personalised customer service. It is very important that any improvement must be demonstrable in individual key performance indicators. Indeed I am pleased to report our year on year “customer scores” are up 10%.

BERKELEY: Almost two thirds of the Top 25 hotel brands today were founded during recessionary times. Competition will become more severe for your brightest and best people. How are you prepared to handle this? Please describe the preventative action you are taking.

GAYMER-JONES: 2009 provided us with a great opportunity to re-launch our Company and set ourselves up for future success. In 2010 we launched these projects, holding focus groups with all our stakeholders provided an enormous amount of relevant information to adapt our business to the new global economy and share approaches within the brand.

The sense of involvement in designing these strategies has created a tremendous opportunity for aligning those individuals with the success. Along with incorporating top talent into the management teams, we have a lot of positive energy we can harness. Looking at key business metrics over the past quarter, these actions have left us in an excellent position for an upturn in competition.

BERKELEY: **What can we anticipate seeing from Sofitel to accelerate repeat business with your current clientele? To achieve that level of success what needs to change with your own people and approaches?**

GAYMER-JONES: We have been re-positioning each of the brands and that has been commented on widely in the media. What is critical now is increasing our “brand equity”. Our sweet spot is a “truly French brand”. Our team are focusing on the key elements of French design. A concept of everyday living based on French elegance and design, which is fit for the purpose and linked to local cultures. What does that mean from a people perspective? It means we have a group, who are excited and energised by the details of the new direction, the “Ambassador” certification, and not sitting on the laurels of the Company. We operate with the mentality of an innovative and small entrepreneurial organisation with a unique set of brands offering a compelling place of work. Collectively, we can demonstrate to our shareholders significant improvement in RevPAR.

BERKELEY: **Any closing thoughts?**

GAYMER-JONES: Our vision is to grow our brands focusing on our three pillars of Design, French authenticity and Food and Beverage. Over the next years we will be adding new and innovative brands that will be incorporated into our hotels into the future such as Thalassa Sea and Spa brand that focuses on Sea Water therapy spa’s our first outside of France will be the Sofitel Bahrain, we believe that it will revolutionise the typical Spa experience at a resort. Our ambition is only exceeded by our motivation.....

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