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Hilton Garden Inn's F&B Enhancements

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At AAHOA this week, Hilton is making some big announcements regarding the F&B program for Hilton Garden Inn. John Greenleaf, SVP and global head of the brand, spoke with *LODGING* about the brand's new enhancements and how Hilton hoteliers are responding to the updated program.

What is driving change in Hilton Garden Inn this year?

At our January conference in Chicago, where there were nearly 2,000 general managers and sales directors from around the world, we introduced what we refer to as "the Hilton Garden Inn brand refresh." We've taken a close look at our audience and focused the refresh on four key attributes of the brand: Driving communication and making changes in our culture, food and beverage, and the prototypes.

We also examined and completely recast the culture of the brand—what we refer to internally as "brand hospitality"—to focus on a new approach, which also includes updating the Hilton Garden Inn Guarantee. Then, of course, there's the food and beverage component. We've taken a look at food and beverage and completely restaged the convenience market, which was previously called the Pavilion Pantry. We have those in test in six hotels in the U.S. and in Europe and two more will be opening very soon. We've also completely redesigned the restaurant, which will be the prototype for North America as well as the other five prototypes we have around the world. We've changed not just the food itself, but also its location—it's now in a multi-use public space—and availability. We sought to update all aspects of the brand, but have been very careful to maintain the core brand competencies for Garden Inn. What we made a very strong effort to do is to take what we've always been good at and focus on making it even better. We've basically incorporated the uniqueness of the prototype and the forward-looking design into the things we're known for and that our guests value—including our look, our leadership in food and beverage, our fitness center, and availability of food through a market.

Let's talk about the F&B in more detail. Why was it important to update your offerings?

We're calling the new concept—which is style in the testing phase—the Garden Market. We want to make sure that the guests know what it offers when they walk in. I think an important consideration for a

global brand is consistency in the core benefits that the guests come to expect. When they choose this brand over others, they know the level of comfort they can expect, and I think that's very important for generating loyalty in a highly valued stay. When you look at the different forces that push and pull on guest satisfaction, food and beverage is clearly one, because guests will be eating three meals over those 24 hours. The better we can cater to the needs of the guests while they're with us, the more we can create value for them. This creates the kind of experience that generates loyalty, because it very clearly shows guests that we've listened to their needs and we're in the process of evolving our product to better meet them. I'm confident that it will generate increases in loyalty, which is one of the data points we're tracking. Further on, we'll be able to show owners an assessment of how these markets impact their assets.

How many properties are piloting the program right now?

There are now six; they are located in Spring, Tex., Pensacola, Fla., Silver Spring, Md., Green Bay, Wisc., and Krakow, Poland; others will be opening soon in Bohol, Wash., and Arlington, Tex., plus another in the United Kingdom for a total of nine properties. Oftentimes, hotel companies will come up with a new brand standard or a requirement for a hotel and push it out and give the hotel owners some time to put it in place. What we've done here that is a little bit different is create a very comprehensive financial model for the level of investment required, the increment of revenue that we anticipate, the margin on the revenue created, the potential for the incremental room rates, and the impact on the food and beverage sales. This way, when we go to the owners and tell them what they will need to put in place at their hotels, we'll have a very strong financial story to tell them.

Why is now the right time to make these enhancements?

The brand has long been successful. We've maintained a significant market share premium through the last year and we've increased it somewhat this year. But when you're the market leader—especially in markets that are as dynamic as they are now with new brands and new ownership of existing brands—it's critically important not to rest on our laurels and assume we can maintain that leadership position by doing what we've been doing. We can use our position of strength to leverage change, which is what we've done. By engaging our owners through our different organizations, our team members learn about our guests' concerns as well as what they like most. We've really taken that leadership position and found out what we need to do to expand. The timing is appropriate, given the time and our place in the lodging market.

How have owners and franchisees been responding?

It's truly been remarkably positive. We've had nothing but support. We were very conscious of the path we took to announce the changes we were about to make. This began with communication to our owners, and now we're working with the industry. People will be aware of the updates we'll be pushing out to the hotels as well as the fresh approach we're taking to our culture and the services we provide in our hotels. The changes in food and beverage are dramatic—especially when you consider our competition. In the market that we're testing, we have prototypes in hotels in the U.S. and in Europe that include a fairly sizable percentage of local products, including prepared food that are available at any time of day.

This is a much more customer-friendly market, one you can actually walk through. We have a couple of different forms of them, and we're looking at different ways to construct them to be able to offer alternatives to owners. People will be able to get food 24 hours a day. The bar in the restaurant in the prototype now is at the front of the hotel, with doors to the outside terrace, which has been repositioned to the front, offering indoor-outdoor dining in markets with agreeable weather. There will be more current menu offerings with smaller portions and shared plates. We're excited to be able to provide guests with a wider variety of options and to offer owners an opportunity to generate more revenue.