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THREE P_s OF LEMON TREE PEOPLE, PLANET AND PROFIT

RATTAN KESWANI, DEPUTY MANAGING DIRECTOR,
LEMON TREE HOTELS LTD TELLS BW HOTELIER
THAT THE EVOLUTION OF THEIR BRAND PORTFOLIO
AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE BUSINESS MODEL
HAVE BEEN BASED ON MARKET DYNAMICS

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Lemon Tree Premier,
City Center, Pune

BY: **PRERNA LAMBA**

IT WAS back in 2004 that Lemon Tree was inception. Over the last 17 years, it has come a long way - from being a hotel with 49 keys to one of the country's largest chains in the mid-priced hotel sector, and the third largest overall, on the basis of controlling interest in owned and leased rooms, as of June 30, 2017, according to the Horwath Report. The brand has evolved and grown over these years and not just spread its geographic footprint.

Explaining the company's strategy on expansion plans, Rattan Keswani, Deputy Managing Director, Lemon Tree Hotels Ltd, says that the evolution of their brand portfolio and transformation of the business model have both been based on market dynamics including the demand-supply gap at different destinations, availability of business development projects that meet feasibility requirements, changes in consumer behaviour and the width of brands, both global and domestic, available in any hotel segment.

FOR PEOPLE, PLANTS AND PROFIT

With a commitment for a healthy and happy planet, Lemon

Tree Hotels follows eco-friendly and Go Green practices. Built around sustainable practices, all products and services are designed around these principles. The way of working includes building a diverse as well as an inclusive organisation and creating an environment-friendly one.

The business model is defined around the concept of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL):

People: Fair and beneficial business practices toward labour and the community

Planet: Sustainable environmental practices

Profit: Economic value created by the organisation after deducting all costs

All Lemon Tree hotels are designed and built in alignment with the best engineering and sustainability practices, environmental protection, pollution control measures, fire and life safety equipment as well as energy and water conservation equipment. The hotels are built in compliance with norms laid down by government authorities. "Building design ensures the maximum use of natural light. We are working towards zero waste, zero discharge and carbon neutrality with medium and long-

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Lemon Tree Premier, Rishikesh

term goals defined for 2026 and 2030 and beyond,” Keswani puts in.

Inclusivity being the cornerstone of brand’s philosophy, Lemon Tree has carved a niche by bringing the specially abled to the mainstream. The company believes the brand should stand for more than ‘just profit’. Talking on the same lines, Keswani says, “We have focussed our efforts on creating a socially inclusive work environment which seeks to bring in people of different backgrounds, abilities and ethnicities and offer them work as a unified team with a common goal.”

“We believe that persons with disabilities (physical, social or economic disabilities leading to an opportunity deprivation) must be provided the same opportunities as others to realise their full potential and live with dignity,” he says, adding, “By creating a supportive environment in the organisation that allows them to deliver their best, we are able to play a part in social inclusiveness, opportunity/ livelihood creation and therefore, nation building.”

On its part, Lemon Tree hires Opportunity Deprived Indians (ODIs) into its workforce which includes employees

with physical disability, speech and hearing impaired, orthopaedically handicapped, acid survivors, visually impaired, low vision as also intellectual disability: Down Syndrome and autism; people from economically/ socially weaker segments like Below Poverty Line (BPL) individuals, widowed or abandoned/ battered/ destitute/ divorced women or orphans or abandoned girls; transgenders and individuals from economically weaker families.

Hiring at Lemon Trees is done from the communities who don’t get education or employment opportunities easily ie the North Eastern states, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and tribal/ interior areas of any state. In the early stages, the company inducted EwD in backend roles like kitchen stewarding and housekeeping where direct guest interaction was minimal.

Also, the focus was on speech and hearing impaired employees. This gave them an opportunity to develop standard operating procedures and training modules in an iterative manner. Subsequently, the brand extended this initiative to guest contact areas such as restaurants where the interaction with guests is an integral part of

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A speech and hearing impaired associate at F&B Service

the job role. Lemon Tree then re-engineered the relevant service process to enable EwD to interact with guests. They engaged with people with orthopaedic impairment where their disability didn't come in the way of their job performance. The brand has now done six trials with Down Syndrome in Delhi-NCR at the coffee shop. With sufficient learning experience from this exercise, the company will soon start hiring such candidates across other hotels and slowly ramp up to a national scale. Autism and acid survivor trials have started and the learnings are getting assimilated. Ever since the initiative started, 3,000-plus ODIs have been trained at Lemon Tree, of which many continue to work with them.

STRONG PIPELINE OF INVENTORY

Lemon Tree currently operates 8,300 rooms in 84 hotels (including Key Hotels) across 52 destinations, in India and abroad, under its brands – Aurika Hotels & Resorts, Lemon Tree Premier, Lemon Tree Hotels, Red Fox Hotels, Keys Prima, Keys Select and Keys Lite. As the current pipeline becomes operational, LTHL will be operating 10,600 rooms in 107 hotels across 66 destinations, in

India and abroad.

Lemon Tree Hotels, including Keys' Hotels, are located across India, in Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai as well as Tier I and II cities like Pune, Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Indore, Aurangabad, Udaipur, Vishakhapatnam, Kochi, Ludhiana, and Thiruvananthapuram. The company expanded on the international front with hotels in Dubai (opened in December 2019) and in Bhutan (February 2020). New hotels are set to open in Bhutan and Nepal.

The group offers seven brands to meet hotel requirements of guests across the upscale and mid-market segments:

Aurika Hotels & Resorts: The upscale brand of Lemon Tree Hotels that curates extraordinary experiences in a stunning ambience, Aurika Hotels & Resorts are stylishly elegant yet comfortably informal.

Lemon Tree Premier: This chain of upper midscale business and leisure hotels elevates the experience while retaining the freshness, quirkiness and energy that Lemon Tree is well known for.

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BRAND & SUSTAINABILITY

Lemon Tree Hotels: The midscale business and leisure hotels uplift your spirits at the end of a long day. Like the fruit they are named after, Lemon Tree Hotels are fresh and sparkling with zest.

Red Fox Hotels: With bold interiors and clean rooms, these economy hotels delight guests with unbeatable value and reliable safety standards. Here friendly smiles and a lively environment go hand-in-hand with professional service.

Keys Prima: This premium brand offers stylish features and excellent service.

Keys Select: Another popular brand that offers comfort and convenience, for both business and leisure travellers.

Keys Lite: Targetted at smart guests looking for affordable and stressfree accommodation during travel.

Ever since its inception, Lemon Tree has kept pace with the evolving demands of guests and created seven different brands. "The asset lite portfolio allows us to be nimble and responsive to opportunities and to spread the geographical footprint without having to invest heavily in capital expenditures and time. We are able to focus better on our brand, loyalty programme and network across India and now outside the country too," Keswani puts in.

GUEST EXPERIENCE

From being shut to operate with certain guidelines, the hospitality industry has re-invented itself. With growing concerns of health and safety, there has been a notable change in the guest's demand. Keswani says they have seen demand shrink to a mere fraction of earlier demand. "COVID-19 protocol and government guidelines lead to a significant re-definition of standard operating procedures and guest services and hotel companies increased their investment in learning and development, though done virtually," he adds.

The customer profile has seen a large change in these 15 months with typical guest no longer travelling on account of restrictions. The quarantine guest or SME guest or individual leisure traveller have different expectations of both price and service.

The brand's loyalty programme continues to present special offers and deals to its loyalty members. "Once the country is able to recover from this pandemic and the economy stabilises, we will see recovery in the hotel sector. At that stage we will be relaunching our loyalty programme to make it more customer friendly, rewarding and interactive," Keswani informs.

LOCKDOWN REGIME

Contactless delivery of services have been critical during the pandemic and Lemon Tree developed a number of alternate processes to ensure guests can stay at our hotels and transact with minimal or no contact. This included use of payment gateways and payment wallets, a digitised check-in process to minimise paperwork, the adoption of a browser based food and beverage system (QRestro) to both order and pay online. This took place alongside the staff following very strict hygiene protocol under the brand's Rest Assured sanitisation programme. Rest Assured is a Lemon Tree Hotels' initiative, in partnership with Diversey, showcasing commitment to creating an environment focused on health, hygiene, safety and wellbeing.

Keswani also shares

CSR initiatives undertaken at the corporate level as well as by the hotels during the lockdown to reach out to and help the less fortunate. He says, "Some of our hotels worked with local administration to provide free packed meals to people who needed them during the most difficult time on the lockdown."

For example Red Fox Hotel, Alwar worked with the City District Magistrate's office; Lemon Tree Premier, Mumbai provided free meals to BMC workers; Lemon Tree Hotel, Viman Nagar, Pune; Lemon Tree Premier, Dwaraka provided free breakfast to COVID patients at Civil Hospital.

Keswani further informs, "As a part of our two per cent CSR, we donated a significant amount to seven NGOs who work in the space of skilling and training PWD for mainstream employment. This is across disability types like deaf, orthopaedic handicap, intellectual/developmental disability and more. We are now working closely with them to ensure these special youth are trained and prepared for employment." Lemon Tree will also hire some of these candidates as a part its inclusion programme. ■



An orthopaedic handicap as a Front Desk team member