

"Besides focusing on consolidation, we are excited about our initiative in providing employment to people with disabilities"

Lemon Tree is probably India's fastest growing hospitality company. Recently they opened their 13th Hotel in India – Lemon Tree Hotel, City Center, Bengaluru, a 187-room upscale, full –service business hotel. The group currently owns and operates 13 hotels in 10 cities aggregating over 1200 rooms with 1500 employees. Seven more hotels are presently under development. By 2012 they expect to have over 2800 rooms and 3000 employees in 20 hotels across 15 major Indian cities. With these plans on the avail, we were successful in squeezing some time from Rahul Pandit, VP, Operations, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company. Excerpts

Can you in brief throw light on your group and what is your USP?

Lemon Tree is a full-service, upscale, moderately priced hotel brand focused on delivering great value to our customers. The company is 8 years old. Lemon Tree is an asset owner and operator and designs, builds, manages and markets all its properties. Expedia, the world's largest online retailer of hotel rooms, in 2010, recognized four Lemon Tree Hotels as the top 1% globally by the Expedia Insiders Select citation. TripAdvisor-the largest third party global hotel rating agency-ranks five Lemon Tree Hotels rank No. 1 in their respective cities, ahead of the top Indian and global hotel brands. We currently have thirteen hotels and by next year end 20 hotels.

Thirteen hotels. That's great. You are growing rapidly. But generally a rapid growth results in loss of quality.

We are conscious of this and have primarily taken two steps to maintain quality: centralization of systems and investing in building great learning and development capability across the organization.

The hospitality industry is full of praise for the informative cards that you place on the table in your restaurants. How did the idea germinate? Do you have a patent?

The Lemon Tree brand is fresh, fun and spirited. The idea germinated in our formative years as a direct approach in bringing a smile to our customers.

Which are your best properties and why?

In resorts, Lemon Tree Amarante Beach Resort, Candolim, Goa and Lemon Tree Vembanad Lake Resort, West of Kumarakom, Kerala – they represent the best of the local ethos, architecture and history. In city hotels, Lemon Tree City Center, Bengaluru and Lemon Tree Hotel, Hyderabad. Both the properties are located in the heart of business with multiple F & B offerings including the award winning Republic of Noodles, Life Fitness gyms, swimming pool and spa.

Being in the industry for so long how do you feel the consumer behaviour has changed over the years?

Consumers are more appreciative of quality and extend loyalty to brands which represent their lifestyle aspirations. We have, as example, in response to customer feedback, focused on delivering a superior sleep experience, extended breakfast hours with health food, introduced tiered high speed broadband access, upgraded the quality of our fitness centers, expanded recreation options and focused on building a wide distribution network. We are also cognizant of the consumer desire for recognition and recently launched our loyalty program, Lemon TreeRewards, to recognize and reward both end consumer and intermediary loyalty.

How much of a role does technology play in the hospitality business?

We see technology as an enabler, than a differentiator. For guests, we have focused on providing reliable, tiered, high speed broadband WiFi and wired connectivity, so that they can enjoy superior business enablement. To drive internal efficiencies, we have consciously deployed technology to drive centralization of systems and processes. We are the first hotel chain in India to deploy a centrally hosted, MPE PMS. Protel. It is hosted at the Tata Communications data center in Chennai and all properties are connected to it on an MPLS network. We have similarly centralized Finance and Revenue Management & Distribution. We are now working on centralized our Sales and POS.

As you look to 2011-12, What are the key priorities that you are focused on for the brand?

Besides focusing on consolidation, we are excited about our initiative in providing employment to people with disabilities. Lemon Tree's Chairman, Mr. Patu Keswani, was given the Shell Helen Award 2010 by the Home Minister, Sh. P.Chidambaram, in recognition of this endeavor. We currently have 70 employees with disabilities, working in the group. We are targeting 10% of our workforce to comprise people with disabilities by 2013. We are also slated to launch two new hotels this year, Lemon Tree Hotel, Chandigarh in Q2 and Lemon Tree Hotel, Delhi in Q4.

February 01, 2011