

View from the top

South Beach Consortium is set to raise Singapore's 'cool' level when it soft-opens in 1Q2015. The search for talent to run the hotel is on. CEO Aloysius Lee talks to Raini Hamdi about the project and finding people

TALENT SCOUTING

What sort of talent are you looking for?

As the product is different, we need people who will buy into its concept. Ours is a HIP hotel, i.e. Highly Individual Place. (When conceptualising it), we were looking at the Hudson in New York, Delano in Miami, SLS Hotel Beverly Hills and Le Royal Monceau (Raffles Paris). These hotels really bring life, energy and connectivity to their public spaces. They understand people want to be 'alone together' (laughs) or, as some call it, 'isolated togetherness'.

What an oxymoron (laughs).

Yes. Four and a half years ago, when the executive chairman (Kwek Leng Beng, City Developments Limited) spoke to me about such a hotel concept, it was still a fresh trend. Now of course most hotel refits are going along these lines.

Won't you be common then?

In Asia, it's not done to the same extent yet. Asian hotels are still largely traditional – the typical big lobbies, halls, etc.

Our three pillars are, firstly, we are a designer hotel, not only in the sense that the hotel is designed by Philippe Starck. We have, for example, the best IT design in-house right now. If you are IT-savvy, you will be extremely happy staying with us; we have the technology, for example, for the TV to be mirrored onto your own device. If you are not IT-savvy, you will also be happy as we are not one of those hotels where you have to figure out how to work the technology.

Our second pillar is to offer a fresh dining experience. We will hopefully sign up a concept from Europe soon – not a celebrity restaurant – but a stylish, contemporary experience that combines shopping and dining in a space of 30,000 sq ft (2,787m²).

Thirdly, we will have a lot of imaginative social spaces to cater to the need for 'isolated togetherness'. We even have such a position as head of social space.

Are you reinventing hotel positions to suit the times and

needs of such a hotel as this?

Yes. We will have, for example, an EAM - sales & marketing services, and all the customer-facing departments will be under him – sales, branding, revenue, catering, front office, reservations, concierge, VIP services (many of these functions are usually under operations).

EAM positions which will enable the executives to become a future GM. This is what we want to do as well, i.e. groom talent.

How many people do you need and how are you going to get them in this labour crunch?

We're recruiting around 60 people from now till June, including the GM and head of human resources. By September the full recruitment will start for around 500 people.

It is difficult to find people. On the other hand, we must be innovative with our job offerings, by thinking differently about posi-



Service should be part of sales and marketing. When I started my career with Singapore Airlines in 1972, I believed the airline had all services – cabin crew, amenities, menus and so on – going under marketing, not operations. Marketing has a stronger feel of the market, which it can drive back to operations.

So what does your EAM - operations do?

They cover F&B – again, a departure from the common practice – housekeeping, engineering and security. So in effect we have two

tions, by offering the right people an advancement when they join us, not just a lateral transfer, so they are motivated by a real new challenge.

We've even set up a good pre-opening office at the site – now we're just waiting for the bodies to come in (laughs).

What advice do you have on working with Asian tycoons?

Firstly I've observed that tycoons really love talent and are passionate about the business. They are open, and they like to share their thinking, philosophy, vision and

10 NEED TO KNOWS ABOUT LEE

- **Who is in your family?** One wife, one son
- **What do you do for fun?** Gossiping
- **Ideal vacation?** Places that provide the latest lifestyle trends
- **How do you book your own leisure trips?** A combination of travel agency and direct Internet booking
- **What are you reading?** Social and economical impact of the

- growing healthy and wealthy retiring community
- **How do you stay healthy?** Eat and walk
- **Favourite food?** Shanghaiese wanton
- **A bad habit you can't kick?** Eating too much
- **Something that never fails to annoy you?** Laziness
- **Most people don't know you can do...** Ballroom dancing

strategy. And they hope you can deliver it for them.

Sometimes it may be that they are so far ahead and running so fast – after all, they are more seasoned, successful and have seen the world – that it is difficult for the executive team members to follow. But I believe when they speak, there is a lot of wisdom and big value at the end of the day, even if they can't justify it there and then.

CDL also owns St Regis and W in Singapore. How would you position South Beach in this collection?

St Regis is traditional luxury while W is hip, which is closer to South Beach, but in a different environment.

What rate are you looking at?

The current rates of hotels in the neighbourhood are around S\$400 (US\$317) to S\$500.

What's the opportunity with travel agencies with this hotel?

Fundamentally, agencies need products. We're creating a new product, probably the first in Asia that offers this kind of a lifestyle choice. With high occupancies in Singapore, we are a serious choice for all segments, be it MICE, bleasure, leisure, etc. Most new hotels that are opening are smaller. We have 654 rooms and are directly connected to Suntec Singapore via an overhead bridge.

You spent a large part of your career as a travel agency CEO (Lotus International, Morning Star Travel Services and The Travel Advisors Hong Kong). What would you do if you were a travel agency CEO today?

It depends on the niche, as there are different challenges for each. An inbound player is subject to overseas clients and must spend a lot on trade show marketing. An outbound player gets good cashflow through sales but must spend a lot on advertising. A

wholesaler has low margins.

Some agencies are too ambitious, going into all areas and losing their core strength. While it is important to be sizeable, they always have to compete with smaller agencies that have lower costs and compete on price. This has gone on for so long.

But I still think a travel agency is a good business to be in. You have all the products to choose from, bundle and promote. So the question is to think ahead about which markets will be the fastest-growing and be prepared to cater to that market. I foresee, for example, that in the next 10 years, the healthy and wealthy market will be big. As well, in Asia, the two biggest markets of the future will be the ageing population and youths.

FAST FACTS: SOUTH BEACH DEVELOPMENT

- A mixed-use contemporary/ecological development comprising over 46,000m² of Grade A office space; 190 residential units; a 654-room hotel designed by Philippe Starck; a retail concept; and a private membership club

- Developed by City Developments Limited (CDL) Singapore and IOI Group Malaysia

- Located opposite Raffles Hotel Singapore on the Beach Road side and is directly connected to Suntec Singapore via an overhead bridge on the Nicoll Highway side

- A heritage site formerly comprising three army blocks and the NCO Club, a favourite haunt for army, naval and air force offices famed for its Olympic-sized swimming pool

- Architecture by Foster + Partners and Aedas

Note: The hotel is currently called South Beach. A decision has yet to be made on a third-party management, franchise or marketing representation

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