

Hoteliers mobilize teams, connections to do good

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For these hotel companies, philanthropy might start at the top, but it doesn't end there. Hoteliers share how they motivate their teams to get involved, and use their connections within the industry to make a difference.



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Editor's note: This is the second installment of a two-part series on the state of philanthropy in the hotel industry. [Part one](#) looked at the impact hoteliers are having on their communities and around the world. This story looks at how hoteliers are inspiring their teams and using their connections within the hotel industry to make a difference.

GLOBAL REPORT—In what might be a metaphor for philanthropy within the hotel industry, Gary Mendell at various times over the past four years has found himself dangling by a rope from a hotel building, side by side with some of the industry's biggest players.

A “who’s who” of hotel executives—from Wyndham Hotel Group President and CEO Geoff Ballotti to former Choice Hotels International CEO Steve Joyce—have rappelled to raise funds and awareness for treatment of drug and alcohol addiction, the cause championed by Mendell’s organization Shatterproof.

One of the first to brave the challenge, Tom Corcoran, co-founder and former president and CEO of FelCor Lodging Trust, was “scared out of his wits rappelling with me,” Mendell said. “And he did it twice that day.”

Mendell, who left his position as CEO of HEI Hotels—the company he founded—to start [Shatterproof](#) in 2013, said he owes a lot of the organization’s success to his friends and connections in the hotel industry.

His reasons for starting Shatterproof are deeply personal: In October 2011, his son Brian died after a struggle with addiction. Mendell wanted to draw attention to a disease that afflicts 25 million people in the U.S., and focus that attention on research into treatments, funding of support programs and advocacy for public policy change.

At the start, that meant organizing events around the country.

“We were looking for something unique and different that would draw media attention to an extreme disease that needed extreme attention,” he said.

Mendell called some of his friends in the hotel industry, and came up with the idea of rappelling off hotel buildings.

“Every city we went to, it was the support of the hotel industry, letting us use their buildings, forming corporate teams, or others involved in the hotel business—whether it’s the capital markets industry, brokerage, owners, operators, brands ... and it continued all across the country. Just about every company I can think of was supportive,” he said.

For the past two years, the rappelling event has been a staple of the [Americas Lodging Investment Summit](#) in Los Angeles, where Mendell said it has raised about \$1.5 million for Shatterproof.

Shatterproof events are now shifting focus more to 5K walks and runs, “because so many more people can do it, and we’ve witnessed the power of it,” Mendell said. “It’s just life-changing. This is what’s going to end the stigma of addiction: people coming together to emotionally support each other.”

This year, five 5Ks were planned; next year, there will be “18 in the 18 largest markets in the country,” he said.

Mendell has difficulty putting into words how much the hotel industry’s support has meant to him and his cause.

“The response has been ... I don’t think I could describe just how wonderful it’s been, the hotel industry’s support of this cause, of this organization. People have just been wonderful,” he said. “We started four years ago and our base of support ... came from two places: my family and friends, and the hotel industry. That’s what launched Shatterproof, that support. People have just been extremely generous, extremely kind and supportive in ways that are just more than anyone could ask for.”

That seems to be the theme for hotel companies that are invested, emotionally as well as financially, in a philanthropic cause: It comes down to who you know, who’s next to you and who’s got your back.

Culture of giving

For many, giving back is so ingrained in the company culture that it has become automatic.

The example that Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants follows was set by its founder Bill Kimpton, according to Ron Vlasic, [Kimpton’s](#) VP of hotel operations for the East Coast region.

“I had the pleasure of working with Bill in San Francisco early on in my career with the company,” he said. “One of the things that I always remembered of Bill was that he recognized how fortunate he had been and truly believed in giving back to the community. We often helped with the various homeless shelters around the city, and we regularly participated in cleaning up the parks, highways and other parts of the city that needed help. It was very important to Bill to give back in various ways, and he made sure that his hotels and restaurants understood the importance of doing so.

“Over the years, these efforts have become a main part of the fabric in our culture. It’s part of how we conduct business, how we recruit and how we approach life. Our industry is unique in that it attracts people from all walks of life, and that common thread that attracts people to our industry is the desire to serve others.”

It usually begins with passion for a cause that has touched the lives of a team member personally.

At hotel investment firm CHMWarnick, “the groups we choose to support and activities we engage in are an extension of our people, and our involvement is extremely personal,” said Managing Director and Co-Chairman Ken Wilson.

“We recognize the importance of supporting the good work of many groups, but our approach is focused on supporting our people in their pursuit of the causes that inspire them most,” he said. “This has historically included a mix of supporting individual efforts, in addition to coming together to have fun and celebrate our collective accomplishments. For us, it’s not an expectation, it’s a culture that supports our people in doing good.”

Causes that have come to the forefront for Australia-based hotel operator Mantra Group include awareness of domestic/family violence and support for victims.

“For [Mantra Group](#), it’s all about knowing what matters to our team and the communities in which we work and live,” said Cherie McGill, executive director of human resources.

No mandate

With that passion and personal connection as the basis, it’s not difficult to get team members to volunteer for charitable initiatives, said Max Verstraete, VP of corporate responsibility at Hilton.

“People realize that at the end of the day, they’re helping their own community,” he said.

Harris Rosen, president and COO of Rosen Hotels & Resorts and founder of the Harris Rosen Foundation, said it makes no sense to try to force anyone to do good.

“There’s no requirement whatsoever for any of our associates to participate in what we do (philanthropically),” he said. “On occasion, they will volunteer and offer their time, or even write a check. But I don’t want anyone to feel uncomfortable if they are unable to take part in some of the things we do. They understand that.

“I think it’s something that really has to come from the heart. Some people are moved, and some people are not.”

Good business

The reward comes from knowing you’ve done the right thing and made a difference, but doing good is also good business, Verstraete said.

“Our hotels and team members do not thrive if the community is not thriving,” he said.

“So if you think about it, this isn’t just a nice thing to do—of course it’s nice and it is right, but there’s also a business case behind all of these philanthropic efforts. It all comes back to the same thing: You’ve got to have a resilient and strong community. If not, people will not want to travel there; they won’t want to work there. We need to invest in our communities.”

A focus on philanthropy also helps with team-building.

“Giving back and being engaged in the things that you care about in your community, as well with the people that you’re so close with, that you work with day to day, it just has so many good outcomes,” said Jim Merkel, CEO of Rockbridge.

For the past six years, the Columbus, Ohio-based hotel investment firm has hosted [Rock the Road Experience](#) (RTRX), a leadership and innovation event that donates all proceeds to Pelotonia, a three-day cycling event benefiting cancer research.

“One of which is ... it brings the team together ... and brings us closer, and that’s been really great for our business. ... It builds deeper relationships, and that continues to blow me away,” Merkel said.

[CHMWarnick](#)’s Wilson agrees.

“For us, philanthropic projects have given back to us as much as we have given over the past 17 years that CHMWarnick has been in business,” he said. “In many instances, it’s a group event, providing a team-building opportunity that you just can’t buy.

“I think it also provides healthy perspective,” Wilson continued. “Let’s face it, most conversations in our office revolve around profitability and investment returns, and it’s nice to balance that with some humanity and forge personal connections amongst the group based on a common interest in helping others. It also provides a platform for us to share another side of team members and celebrate the unique interests and personal pursuits within our group, support one another and celebrate our accomplishments.”

The benefits for employee recruitment and retention are another happy consequence.

[Hilton](#) has noticed that impact especially on its younger workforce, Verstraete said.

“We have something around 50% millennials across our workforce,” he said. “These younger generations want to work for a company that’s doing the right things. ... More and more, customers buying a brand want to make sure that brand is doing the right thing, too.”

Rosen attributes a low employee turnover at Rosen Hotels & Resorts to the pride his associates have in the company’s philanthropy.

“Without hesitancy, I can say all of our associates are proud of our company and what we’re doing. ... We probably have the lowest turnaround in the industry, by far,” Rosen said. “In hospitality, the employee turnover is sometimes 40%. Our turnover is in single digits, and some of that is the result of people retiring. People love to work with us and believe we’re a good company.”

[Rockbridge](#)’s Merkel added that he’s been pleasantly surprised by how generous his employees and colleagues are when asked to help.

“If it’s important to you, they care,” he said.