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Exclusive Interviews

Exclusive Interview | Pramod Kulkarni, Senior VP (Group), Revenue Management – MIS – IT – Brand Marketing, Narangs International Hotels Pvt. Ltd.

“I have a habit of learning new things and my passion is to acquire complete knowledge and perfection in every field.”

— Pramod Kulkarni



Editor: Tell us about your journey. How did it all start?

It's an interesting story of non-hotelier background person to become General Manager and then Vice President of the hotel chain. In my early age, I became independent, when I started my private tuitions at the age of 14 and finished my studies on my own. I completed my education from Science stream and then completed my MBA Finance degree and in parallel finished IT Engineering.

Since childhood, I have a habit of learning new things and my passion is to acquire complete knowledge and perfection in every field. In 2001-02 I started with my career with Dishnet DSL – internet service provider company for a short period, then worked as a banker in one of the reputed banks for some time. After understanding all the banking functions took over IT project called TBC project (Total banking connectivity) for the same bank and became IT in charge of the project. Finished IT project in a couple of years' time and established all ATMs across India successfully.

In 2004 I shifted to the new industry which is Automotive industry and joined Premier Auto Electric limited which was dealing in all automotive parts, inverters, CNG stations in India. I was reporting to CEO & President of Company and handled MIS functions which were mainly focused on P&L and balance sheet analysis and closely worked with IT team and in-house software programmers to develop in-house ERP called 'Total Business Solution'. I was also handling part-finance functions such as credit approvals, MRP working, Cost accounting, setting uprights etc. Proud to mention I made a record of getting confirmation just within 3 months' period and 4 promotions in 2 years' time span. I helped this Company to shift from Gross Operating Losses to Net Profit which is one of the biggest achievement I can say.

I was very curious about hotel functions and that time decided to join the hotel industry. In 2006 I joined Orchid 5 star Hotel – first Ecotel Hotel of Asia in Whole-time Technical Director's Office and took over MIS and Admin functions for all Kamat Hotels and Concept Hospitality hotels. Started with junior position and record of getting promoted consistently for 2 years to become Assistant Manager - MIS. I was a part of the budget committee from Corporate Office the main functions include preparation of MIS Reports, underlying facts and figures to senior management for their immediate action, Revenue analysis of detailed market segmentation/business source of hotels and very detailed cost centre wise P&L Report with variance analysis, moreover finance-related functions. Also, travelling to various hotels conducting audits and quarterly MIS meeting with GM & all department heads gave me a lot of insights and knowledge about hotel functions.

I can say I am probably one of the early comers to get knowledge of digital media and was handling GDS & Revenue Management for Orchid hotels. Early stages got the gist of Search Engine Optimization for the website and I remember we were on top ranking for most of the relevant keyword searches. GDS was a primary business for hotels as that time only OTA which was active in India was Expedia. My boss is a veteran of the Hotel Industry and I learned a lot from him to get hold of the various function of hotels.

In 2008 for the short term I joined Golden Palms Hotels as Finance Head for Group as well performed as acting General Manager for this group. I worked for some time and then joined back Concept Hospitality at the end of 2008 as Corporate General Manager – MIS, reporting to Chairman & Managing Director of Company. CHPL then just separated

out from Kamat Hotels and we started with 3-4 small hotels as a separate Company.

From 2009 till 2015 we opened around 45 new hotels and became a successful Hotel Management chain in India and abroad. I spent around 7 years in CHPL witnessed the launch of the brand 'The Fern' – Upscale/midscale brand and 'Beacon Hotels' – budget hotel brand. Done everything possible to grow with the Company. I can proudly quote I was one of the youngest General Manager in Hospitality, became GM at the age of 26 years.

With strong leadership, I took over the IT Department in 2009-10 and also formed separate Online Revenue Department. Various functions starting from Financial Feasibility of new projects, Pre-opening budgets, staff strength, Budgeting and Forecasting, IT requirement/negotiation and implementation, e- Distribution, Revenue Management, Reputation Management, Brand Marketing, Digital Marketing, MIS Revenue analysis, P&L Report preparation for hotels and for Company with variance analysis, Cost & MIS Controls, Marketing Plans, setting up chart of accounts for new hotels, procurement and negotiation I handled almost all functions during my tenure. I had completed 200+ Financial Feasibility Reports of various hotel projects during my tenure.

In January 2016, I joined The Ambassador Group as Vice President and responsible for Revenue Management, eDistribution, Brand Marketing, MIS setup, Information Technology, Administration & part of recruitment & talent hunt functions. Then got promoted as Corporate Vice President and today working as Senior Vice President for The Ambassador Group (Hotels & Inflight Catering).

The Ambassador Group (NIHPL) is well known for The Ambassador Hotels and In-flight Catering Services - Ambassador's Sky Chef. With the existence of 7 decades, the group has created a legacy in Indian Hospitality Sector. In past four and a half year, I can proudly quote we are successful in reviving The Ambassador Brand. Doing all required changes in operations, services, product up-gradation and brand reputation resulted into a healthy bottom line.

The Ambassador Group has 3 hotels located at Mumbai, Chennai and Aurangabad. Mumbai and Chennai hotels are classified 4-star category whereas Aurangabad hotel is 5-star classified. Inflight Catering Division - Ambassador's Sky Chef located at Mumbai & Delhi catering to most of the international and domestic airlines. Our online segment is one of the strongest segment in hotels contributing around 50-55% of total room business.

We intend to expand the Ambassador brand in India and abroad by acquiring new hotels in the coming years.

Editor: What do you think it takes to succeed in this industry?

Your ambition, Passion, Dedication, proactive in taking initiatives, learning, a combination of hard and smart work, leadership qualities and most important is your attitude. Also, perfection in given task – whatever you do, finish it properly not half-heartedly and enjoy performing your responsibilities which is a key of success.

Editor: What are the attributes you look for while selecting or hiring? If someone wants to work with you, what should they do?

First thing I observe is a person's learning ability and attitude of the person which is very important.

Education and experience also matter but it's secondary, if you don't have the right attitude then you won't fit into my requirement. A person should be positive and must have a passion to achieve something in his life.

Many people worked with me at the junior level are now enjoying very senior positions in operations and back office at many reputed hotel brands. If someone wants to work with me he needs to have patience, ready to take new challenges and keep smiling even under pressure.

Editor: What according to you can trainees do while they are training at hotels to make it a win-win for them & the hotel/unit?

We had batches of Management Trainees and I saw many Industrial trainees and summer trainees in the past 15 years, one thing I advise to all that today's trainees are tomorrow's managers.

To train them the hard way is part of their curriculum but successful brands treat trainees not like temporary resources but like a permanent asset. For Management Trainee I used to conduct lectures for them teaching them how to go about budgeting & forecasting, food cost control and other analytical aspects.

I have seen a lot of talent in trainees, they are like kids we need to understand their skills/capability and develop them to grow in their career path and useful for the Organization. We have developed Career Development Program for Trainees and other employees which really works in finding talent.

Just to give you an example one of summer trainee joined me in 2013-14 is today's Corporate Revenue Manager for Ambassador Hotels. It's all depends on the leader how they handle & develop their employees.

Editor: What are some of the trends you see impacting the hospitality industry?

- Travel has increased a lot in the past 10 years and thus increase in demand. Accordingly, additional room supply in the market.
- Growth of online segment – OTAs, Brand Website and GDS.
- Online Reputation – Review portals today changed the overall scenario of Industry.
- Digitalization – Social media, Digital Marketing and eDistribution with Revenue Management have become key areas for success in all types of hotels.
- Automation & use of technology in every corner of the hotel.
- The emergence of budget / standalone hotels & growth of unorganised sector like homestays impacting bigger brands
- COVID19 Pandemic impacted badly to travel and hotel industry today, probably trend will continue with low occupancy level without inbound business.

Editor: Tech is now an enabler for great hospitality. Can you share with us some of the tech that goes into creating your guest experience?

There are many technologies we used for many years and we are adopting new technologies and upgrading IT infrastructure from time to time. Since many years I am

personally involved in the development of many software used in the hotel industry today.

Guest Wifi: Considering high mobile internet usage, enabling wifi for guest with seamless connectivity in every corner is a necessity today. We have upgraded overall infrastructure with latest Ruckus Access Points and Antlab Gateway (Gateway is a brain of wifi infrastructure) with PMS interface.

Also upgraded internet bandwidth for the guest line. In the past 4 years, we haven't received a single complaint, guests are appreciating our wifi speed and seamless connectivity.

WinHMS: We are using WinHMS PMS / POS and back-office solution to provide good pre- check in to checkout experience to our guests. All users are trained on our user-friendly PMS & all work independently without issues. Designation wise rights, budgeting & forecasting modules, auto reservation confirmation email, touch POS, guest history tracker, centralised guest database are some of the good features of this system.

Post lockdown we are shifting to mobile-based (both android & ios) PMS / POS for the touchless experience.

STAAH: we use STAAH as Channel Manager which connect PMS and various online channels including GDS, OTAs, Brand Website IBE to creates live time inventory and rate flow on all online channels. It creates an inventory pool for all online channels and thus maintains inventory parity. With rate integration, both B2C and B2B rates can be managed without rate disparity. STAAH is now connected with WinHMS through API which helps us getting reservation details directly in our PMS. STAAH also has analytical reports helping the day to day revenue management functions.

Synxis: We use Synxis Sabre Hospitality Solutions for GDS connectivity. All our hotels are live on all GDS through Synxis as connectivity partner. Synxis has API with STAAH and thus we manage dynamic inventory and rates through STAAH easily.

BrandGain : Online Reputation Management including a collection of data from multiple online channels and review portals to single platform and posting management response to all guest reviews including social mentions is carried out through BrandGain. All our GMs uses this system extensively as we have SOP of reverting with a customized reply to each guest review within 24 hours. It gives analytical data and trend analysis with AI separating negative comments highlighting the area of concern helps us identifying issue and root cause.

For Inflight Catering division we have created our own ERP with Challan, Catering & billing modules. It has various permutations and combination to automate the overall process, implementation is going on in Delhi Unit. The entire work of developing & deploying this system is done in-house by our software programmers. The entire system with all modules is created at a very low cost and with all copyrights to us. Once it is ready we intend to develop our own Intranet and Purchase / Material management modules. Apart from technology human integration is most important in exceeding guest satisfaction which we follow strictly in our hotels.

Editor: Two things you would like to change in the industry.

In hotel industry back of the house employees are not getting proper attention and value compare to service department employees, which I admit in past few years it is

changed a lot but still there is equal talent in BOH employees and they should get equal chance and industry should treat them equally.

In recent years I have seen many BOH employees came together and formed associations and created value for their functional department is really a good approach. Employees have no choice but get attached only in a single department. Multifunction learning and multitasking is today's need, HODs shall allow employees for cross-training in inter-department functions which is not happening much in the hotel industry.

One of the points I would like to highlight is the Hospitality industry in India contributes around 10% of GDP and gives employment to 5 crore people. Even with such a high contribution, our industry gets neglected, the Government have to pay more attention to develop the tourism sector. Domestic and state tourism to be promoted extensively to get better results which will create more job opportunities.

We have the potential for domestic travel, new destinations to be developed and existing destination shall get better infrastructure and marketing.

Editor: What can we expect in the coming year?

We had expansion plans in the coming year but due to current pandemic probably coming year will be more challenging, we expect drastic reduction in occupancies as international travel has stopped completely. The future plans and forecasting will depend on how soon we get the vaccine on Coronavirus.

Overall life has changed, many have lost their jobs in industry and there would be pay cut expected in many

organizations. It's important to reduce your fixed and variable costs and see how soon you get breakeven for sustainability. The same time cost is expected to go up with the implementation of additional hygiene and sanitization measures. The coming year aims at focusing on gaining back lost opportunities and business. Revenue Management & Digital Marketing:

Online Segment is the future of the Hotel Industry, as the customer has become tech-savvy with erevelution we can see more conversion from a mobile platform and online channels. With 15 years of experience in Revenue Management, eDistribution, Online Reputation Management & Digital Marketing I have case studies of how to make online segment as one of the primary segment contributing excellent revenues for hotels.

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