

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

The Greening of Kimpton Hotels: Five Valuable Lessons

By Jeff Slye, CEO, Business Evolution Consulting



Mr. Jeff Slye

We all know that when it comes to setting the style standards for hospitality, boutique hotels are among the industry's most formidable trendsetters. Often, Kimpton Hotels have led the pack with innovative design and unique programs such as in-room yoga, tall rooms, and goldfish to keep the guest company. In 2005, they decided to make one statement that will never go out of style - green is the new black.

Not long ago, imagining a world class hotel trying to mesh a high-end guest experience with an eco-initiative was downright laughable. Ask a \$300 a night guest to use 1-ply toilet paper resembling sandpaper and they would disappear faster than you could say "hemp seed." However, as the urgency of global care has risen so has the quality and distribution of eco-friendly products.

Kimptons Hotels, with 39 hotels in the United States and Canada, was founded on a belief to do good while doing good business. In fact, they have had their eye on being environmentally responsible since 1985 by creating a roof-top park at the Galleria Park Hotel, the eco-friendly Hotel Triton, and eco-celebrity suites. At the turn of the century, Kimpton desired to take their eco-consciousness to a higher level and the timing was right considering the recent influx high-quality environmental products infiltrating the marketplace. It was clear that Kimpton could launch a national program without sacrificing the guest experience. In fact, they could even enhance it. The question was how.

They needed someone to help lead the charge in delivering stylish and memorable hotel experiences while reducing their ecological footprint at the same time. As their project manager and lead environmental consultant, Business Evolution Consulting helped create one of the most comprehensive eco-program in the boutique hotel industry today, "Kimpton EarthCare." So far, the program is paying off huge dividends for the environment, its guests, and Kimpton's bottom line. In just a few months Kimpton has saved hundreds of trees, removed thousands of gallons of toxic cleaning supplies from our rivers and oceans, and has tracked over \$500,000 of new revenue attributed to EarthCare.

Although I don't typically like to give away the ending, I feel compelled to share the ultimate conclusion that came from greening Kimpton - EVERY hotel and hotel management entity should have an environmental program. It is doable, cost effective, and simply the right way of doing business. To help you along in the process of becoming planet-friendly or even more planet-friendly, I'll share five lessons I learned along the path to "greening Kimpton."

Lesson 1 – It Takes a Sincere Desire to Make a Difference

Kimpton didn't need to be hugging trees to show me they had a sincere commitment to further diminish their environmental impact. They already had an environmental partner, Trust for Public Land, and a history of being environmentally sensitive. Kimpton's environmental commitment became crystal clear

when concerns were presented to their Chief Operating Officer, Niki Leondakis, about the environmental program being mimicked by competitors. Leondakis stated, "What could be better for the environment and EarthCare than having our program adopted by every other hotel in the industry?" This attitude touched the entire executive management team and set the foundation for the success of Kimpton EarthCare.

Lesson 2 – It Takes Powerful Partnerships

From day one Kimpton wanted its vendors and suppliers to share the same mindset and ideals of EarthCare. This proved to be instrumental in the program's rapid development. Some legacy vendors had to be replaced because of their inability to deliver environmentally friendly products. Others have furthered their relationship with Kimpton by working hard to produce or provide products that meet EarthCare standards. One of the greatest "wins" was vendors agreeing to take-back policies in which they would collect packaging and materials from their previous deliveries to recycle and reuse. In addition, the eco-industry is a passionate industry that prefers to do business with like-minded companies. Kimpton's eco-partners have become somewhat of an extended sales team by referring and recommending Kimpton Hotels to their customers and contacts.

Lesson 3 – It Takes a Clear Plan

When I was introduced to Kimpton, they had great ideas for the national program but limited time and personnel to sift through them and execute a plan. I received my program notes from all corners, including brain storming ideas that were literally still on napkins complete with coffee stains. Until then, they had done some remarkable things for the environment, but nothing comprehensive and company-wide.

To leverage these past efforts and make sense of all the future ideas and possibilities, I created a program plan with one of Kimpton's Director of Operations, Michael Pace, who was acting as their internal environmental specialist. Our first step was to develop an executive committee that would review and filter all the products and practices from an environmental, financial, and operational standpoint. The result was a 'workable' program for all hotels called "Kimpton EarthCare." This committee included Steve Pinetti (SVP of Sales and Marketing), Michael Pace (Director of Environmental Programs and Operations for several San Francisco Hotels), Niki Leondakis (Chief Operating Officer), and Andrew Freeman (Vendor Partnerships and Public Relations).

Our next step? Write a clear, thorough, yet simple plan to roll out an eco-program over the next several years. The result was a multi-phased EarthCare program launched in March 2005 with each subsequent phase rolled out quarterly. The initial phase focused on easy-to-adopt products and practices that required minimal effort. The later phases, in which we are currently engaging, require more research and diligence as they get closer to the guest experience. Each phase introduces about 5 to 7 new products and/or practices.

Lesson 4 – It Takes Communication, Communication, and More Communication for Hotel Buy-In

I know the above sounds like a marriage counselor's recommendation to an unhappy couple, but with 39 distinct hotel personalities, clear and regular communication was critical to program acceptance. As you know, Hotel Managers are in the business of filling rooms and delivering quality service, so EarthCare might have been received to some as "another initiative from corporate (insert sigh here)!" Recognizing this, our job was to make the process easy and to demonstrate the immense revenue potential beyond the benefits to the environment. To gain further buy-in from the individual hotels, we enlisted their help in the creation of the program - from suggesting the name of the program to researching new vendors. It was also transparent who was involved in the creation of EarthCare and how decisions were made, including any financial analysis. Finally, we revved up enthusiasm by sharing EarthCare successes stories every couple of weeks and by launching a company-wide contest for the best eco-idea.

Lesson 5 – It Takes Continued Momentum

So far, my greatest moment working with Kimpton was when Steve Pinetti and Michael Pace said,

"Kimpton EarthCare is not an initiative or a program, but rather the way that Kimpton will be doing business, now and for the future." Below are actions that Kimpton is taking to ensure the program's momentum and longevity.

EarthCare Champions

The pulse of EarthCare is its Champions Team. They are 50 Kimpton employees across the United States and Canada, from management to front line, who volunteer their time to provide the internal support, lend credibility, and ensure the success of the program.

Impact Tracking

The million dollar question... "Are the results trackable? Kimpton is continually measuring and tracking both regional and national results including environmental impact, awards/certifications, financial savings, public relations, and new revenue opportunities.

Here's just a sample of the results we achieved:

- Over \$500,000 in new revenue attributed to EarthCare
- Over 12,000 gallons (over 360 bathtubs) of toxic cleaners removed from our water supply
- Conserved over 103,000 gallons of water at Hotel Allegro, Chicago
- Hotel Monaco Salt Lake City awarded the e2 environmental award
- Galleria Park Hotel in San Francisco saved \$4,000 from just changing Exit lighting to LEDs

Hotel Auditing

Every two weeks, each hotel is reviewed for its progress in meeting EarthCare standards. This provides an opportunity to uncover challenges or areas of resistance as well as victories and success stories from vendors, guests, and employees. Furthermore, monitoring this progress also serves as a motivator for those who are behind or simply slow to adopt change.

Partnerships & Community Outreach

Kimpton recognized early on they were in the hotel business, not environmentalism so they cleverly surrounded themselves with people who were. Some of these include the Trust for Public Land, Danny Seo (eco-design consultant), California Integrated Waste Management Board, the Green Festival, and Business Evolution Consulting.

As I've shared, all of this has been achieved without any major capital investments, operational restructuring, or major sales campaigns. There is no reason why any hotel shouldn't have an environmental program in place. If Kimpton, with so many unique hotel personalities and sub-brands, can accomplish such a progressive environmental program, so can your hotels – regardless if you are a small hotel or large chain. It's doable. It won't sacrifice the quality of your guest experience. It leads to new market share and additional revenue. And it makes sense... for the environment, for guests, for the community, and of course, for your business. If green is the new black – it's safe to say that it's not a flashy trend, but the fashion of the future.

As the lead project manager and consultant for Kimpton Hotels and Restaurant's EarthCare environmental initiative, Jeff Slye has been instrumental in creating and executing the hospitality industry's most revered eco program. Mr. Slye founded Business Evolution Consulting to address the growing needs of organizations to become 'eco-friendly,' while continuing to reduce their costs and deliver high quality services and products. In combining his business background and commitment to the

environment, he provides a powerful and unique perspective on environmental issues and objectives of organizations. Mr. Slye can be contacted at 415-871-1932 or jeff.slye@businessevolutionconsulting.com

Copyright © 1997 - 2005 HotelExecutive.com