

Gaylord experience coming to Mesa

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John Imaizumi is a man on the run.

He has but a few hours to show a group of visiting Arizonans one of the largest hotel-convention centers on the planet, a tour that takes them not just through glitzy showrooms and restaurants but into the pristine guts of the operation.

At the same time, the hotel is checking in about 2,600 guests for a convention of Kawasaki dealers, setting up literally acres of displays and firing up the kitchen for the first of about 14,000 meals the Kawasaki folks will gobble in a single weekend.

Once all that's done, Imaizumi's day won't be. Somehow, that evening, he has to juggle two of his kids' school events with a show by the Southern rock band 38 Special in the hotel's huge and ultraswank nightclub.

At the moment, however, none of that is on his mind.

Someone has left a dirty coffee cup under a bench, and Imaizumi, the impeccably dressed general manager of the Gaylord Texan resort, stops to pick it up.

It's a lowly little chore, a mere housekeeper's task, but nothing - not a dirty cup, not a scrap of paper - can be allowed to sully the edenic ambience of the Gaylord Texan's 4.5-acre centerpiece, a glass-enclosed garden with rivers, free-standing restaurants and facades meant to evoke the Spanish missions of old.

Thus is formed a marriage between utter, gargantuan size and minute attention to every tiny detail - a marriage that has propelled Gaylord Hotels to the forefront of the multibillion-dollar industry of meetings and conventions.

That marriage explains the Valley-wide buzz that accompanied the announcement Sept. 3 that Gaylord would build its next major venue near Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.

The buzz went national, in fact, as hotel-industry publications and Web sites pulsed with news of Gaylord's planned expansion.

Just a few days after the announcement, *The Republic* accompanied a group assembled by East Valley Partnership, a business-government consortium that is heavily promoting the Gateway area, as it toured the Gaylord facility in Grapevine, Texas. Object: Find out what makes this place tick.

No lone STARS

Gaylord Texan is one of four major convention venues owned by Nashville-based Gaylord Entertainment Co., but Gaylord likes to think of them as one.

That's because a big part of the company's strategy is to hook a business or association on its facilities and service and rotate the groups among the different geographically themed properties from year to year.

Gaylord's approach to customer service begins with its STARS. It's the word Gaylord uses instead of "employees." The acronym stands for smiles, teamwork, attitude, reliability and service with a passion.

"You gotta take care of your STARS first," Imaizumi said. "They, in turn, will take care of the guests. The financials come later."

The driving force behind this approach is Colin Reed, the British-born chief executive of Gaylord, who told an audience in Mesa last month: "Good customer service derives from a loyal workforce. In order to have a loyal workforce, you have to have a very happy workforce, and that's the bottom line."

So to be a STAR at the Gaylord Texan means:

- A cafeteria ("one of the best restaurants in the hotel, only for the STARS," Imaizumi says) where the food is cheap and employees get a \$3 voucher per shift to eat there.
- A profit-sharing plan that includes everyone from top boss to rookie housekeeper.
- Quarterly pep rallies complete with cheerleaders and \$100 "high five" prizes for workers who go beyond the call of duty.
- For uniformed workers, company-supplied duds that are delivered, freshly laundered, by a huge conveyor system after the employee swipes an electronic ID card.
- The same name badge for everyone: First name, hometown (Imaizumi: "That's where the heart's from"), and no titles.
- An in-house promotion program that gives upward mobility to about 400 workers a year.
- High expectations and frank communication. "I don't sell anybody to come work here," Imaizumi said. "They gotta want it."

One result of all this grooming: An employee turnover rate of 25 percent to 30 percent a year. "The industry is probably three times what we are for turnover," Imaizumi said.

That means the Texan can skim the cream from the 25,000 to 30,000 job applications that pour in every year, even though Imaizumi said the pay scale is comparable with other hotels in the Dallas area.

Sparkling venue

From 1,800 to 2,000 STARS look after an enormous facility whose statistics tell only part of the story.

In theory, any company with deep pockets could assemble a physical venue like the Texan: More than 1,500 rooms, a vast convention area, a snazzy glass-covered atrium.

But the idea, Imaizumi said, is to make the Gaylord experience so special and unique that groups will come again and again.

Take the food, for example.

"When we give them what they ask for, it's not what they want," Imaizumi said. "(If they say) 'I want chicken' and we give them chicken, that's not what they wanted. They wanted an experience."

So that's what Gaylord sells. When groups are negotiating banquet menus, Gaylord entertains their meeting planners in a richly appointed dining room adjacent to the vast convention-center kitchen. Food is sampled. Wine is consumed. Deals are made - and then, months later, the kitchen cranks out exactly the menu that was settled on.

There are exceptions to the rule, however.

Ty Thoren, the Texan's top chef, said a meeting planner on a tight budget may order, say, 2,500 sandwiches for lunch. But 2,500 hungry guys may not be happy with that. "So I might just go back and say, 'We're not going to give them sandwiches tomorrow. We're going to give them a hot meal,'" Thoren said.

'Awesome experience'

Those 2,600 Kawasaki people checking into the Texan in September weren't there just to occupy hotel rooms.

The company was using the resort to introduce products, conduct marketing and sales seminars and give technical presentations to the people who sell Kawasaki products in the field.

It was a complex event requiring lots of hands-on help from the Texan, said Sherry Drzewicki, meeting-services manager for Kawasaki's U.S. branch.

"We had an awesome experience at Gaylord," she said. "Just terrific. I couldn't find one negative thing about it."

Drzewicki sang the praises of Gaylord's meeting coordinators - the company calls them the "teal coats" - who stick with a group from initial planning until the last delegate checks out.

"We had two coordinators," Drzewicki said. "When we needed something, it was just immediate. The service level was just above and beyond."

The Red Hat Society, a 10-year-old social organization for women of a certain age who like to dress in purple dresses and red hats, gets to a Gaylord as often as members can, said Laura Lara, who manages group events nationally and internationally.

Red Hats have convened at Gaylord Texan and Gaylord Palms in Florida, and they plan conventions both at the Texan and the new Gaylord National near Washington, D.C.

"Every Gaylord is themed so differently that it's a great experience each time for them," Lara said. "The Gaylord properties are very large and conducive to our events."

"We don't typically like to do citywide conventions," because it's more convenient to have delegates stay and meet in one venue, she added.

Imaizumi said the Red Hats provided visible evidence, however, that when a group visits the Gaylord it spills into other parts of town.

"With red hats and purple dresses, you could see 'em at the malls, you could see 'em at the galleries, at a mall in Dallas, you could see 'em in downtown Grapevine. You'd see 'em everywhere," Imaizumi said.

"They're eating, drinking, shopping, having a great time. Lovely group."

Lara said Gaylord's food service is stellar.

"They've always worked with us on catering very specific custom menus for our ladies," she said. "In Orlando, they did individual red-hat cakes."

Where things stand

In the month-plus since Gaylord first announced its Mesa venture, the company and DMB Associates, from whom Gaylord is buying the resort site, have been ironing out a development agreement with the city.

An early draft showed Mesa allowing Gaylord to retain bed taxes to be collected at its resort, as long as the money is used to promote its Valley venue and Arizona tourism.

Under an economic-development provision in state law, Mesa also will take ownership of the land and lease it back to Gaylord, giving the company a break on property taxes.

No drawings nor site plans for the Mesa site have been drafted. Mesa is annexing and rezoning the site.

The past month, of course, has seemed like several lifetimes in the financial markets. Yet, while Gaylord's most recent annual report with the Securities and Exchange Commission lists numerous potential threats, including "adverse changes in the national economy," Reed said the company did its homework before settling in the Valley.

"Over the past few years, the greater Phoenix area tends to be either one or two out of the top 10 markets that our meeting planners want to visit," Reed said. "And that's why we've been very heavily focused here."

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