

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL'S SECRET SAUCE

BY JOTHAM LIM

A hotel's employees are its brand ambassadors, the ones who deal directly with customers or provide support to those who do. Hiring the right person for the job is no easy feat, but it is one that Marriott International has been able to do year after year.

That is the reason the company has won the Kincentric Best Employers (previously Aon Best Employers) award in 51 countries around the world. This includes 17 countries in Asia-Pacific.

"The secret sauce is the values instilled by our founders, which remain at the core of our organisation. This was best articulated by our founder, J Willard Marriott, who once said, "Take care of associates, and they will take care of the customers," says Marriott International Asia-Pacific group president Craig S Smith.

For example, he says, during the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) — which struck Hong Kong in 2003 — hotel occupancy fell across the board and its associates were afraid that they would be let go. "However, we were clear that our priority was our people and we were committed to no layoffs despite the circumstances.

"At the time, one of our associates was struggling to pay his mortgage while raising two young children. So, the company offered him an advance on his salary. To this day, he still talks about how touched he was and the lasting impact the gesture had on him. Our commitment to our people is truly a point of pride."

Smith emphasises the importance of being on the ground, saying that upper man-



agement should set an example for others.

"There is no substitute for walking the hotel floors and interacting with guests and associates. Each time I am in the market and on the road, I make it a point to visit our hotels to meet the teams because I firmly believe it is the best way to know our business. This is a practice I take from our chairman, Bill Marriott, who will not leave a hotel until he has shaken hands with every single associate," says Smith.

He notes that there has been a shift in the job market and employees are increasingly looking for a socially responsible employer. Hence, Marriott International has put an emphasis on its global sustainability and social impact programme — Serve360: Doing good in every direction.

"By the end of 2025, the company aims to decrease its waste headed for the landfill by 45%, cut food waste by 50% and reduce water and carbon intensity by 15% and 30% respectively. Most recently, we announced

our global initiative to switch from single-use toiletry bottles to larger, pump-topped bottles in guest rooms by the end of 2020," says Smith.

Chief human resources officer Regan Taikitsadaporn highlights other initiatives undertaken by the company to accommodate and empower its associates. "The Global Voyage Leadership Development Program is our award-winning leadership development programme that provides recent university graduates with a combination of hands-on, discipline-specific training and a leadership-focused curriculum," he says.

The participants of this 18-month programme, known as Voyagers, will graduate to become supervisors or assistant managers. "One of our previous Voyagers has already taken on the role of learning and development manager at The St. Regis Kuala Lumpur (part of Marriott International)," says Regan.

He also talks about the Marriott Devel-

opment Academy (MDA), another platform that aims to help associates build foundational leadership and discipline skills for their current roles and to support their career development. "MDA is personalised and curated based on individual learning goals. There are more than 1,000 courses tied to functional and leadership competencies to choose from. We are currently at a participation rate of 73% in Asia-Pacific," he says.

Marriott International also seeks to raise the awareness of the importance of gender parity and equal opportunities in the workplace. To this end, it has partnered the Asian University for Women (AUW) in Bangladesh, a regional institution dedicated to women's education and leadership development.

In June, Marriott International announced AUW as a regional partner on its global website, which allows Marriott Bonvoy members (a customer loyalty programme) to donate points to the cause, which will be converted into cash contributions that go towards scholarships for the students.

Smith believes that the associates are Marriott International's best assets. "I think successful leadership, at a very basic level, relies on the understanding that you are nothing without your team. However, it is also about understanding that all of your team members are unique individuals and should be treated as such," he says.

"Ultimately, an organisation can have great human resource policies and create videos and posters. But it is about putting the company's values into practice and demonstrating care and respect. How you treat an individual sends a loud message to the entire office about your values," says Smith. E