

# Joie de Vivre and the Art of the Hotel

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Joie de Vivre is California's largest boutique hotel management company, operating nearly 40 boutique hotels, including a luxury lodging camp resort. The portfolio comprises a total of 4,500 guestrooms, including five spas and twenty distinctive restaurants. Joie de Vivre's growth strategy focuses on market penetration, to become the one-stop hospitality provider in California by creating multiple products in one geographic area. The hotels, which range from budget minded to luxury, are situated throughout a variety of suburban, urban, and waterfront locations in and around San Francisco, Marin County, Silicon Valley, Santa Cruz, Big Sur, Sacramento, Sonoma County, Los Angeles, Venice Beach, Huntington Beach, and Laguna Beach. Joie de Vivre has recently grown to become California's largest independent hotelier, entering eight new regional markets over the last two years. Following its expansion into Southern California, Joie de Vivre has become the second-largest boutique hotel operator in the United States.<sup>1</sup>



**Entrance to the Hotel Maya, Long Beach, California**

Privately owned, Joie de Vivre's diverse collection of lodging properties currently generates nearly \$240 million in annual revenues.<sup>2</sup> The company has not only remained profitable, but has achieved an aggressive expansion strategy during the economic downturn by developing unique properties, cultivating repeat guests, and creating an inspirational work culture. Here are some of the elements to their success.

### Creating the dream experience

Joie de Vivre's product development strategy is based on a lifestyle-driven conceptual approach founded on customer psychographics. Joie de Vivre hotels reflect the personalities of their guests with unique themes, design, and amenities. Mr. Conley expresses it like this: "[we] create an 'identity refreshment' where guests will find their own personalities echoed in the style and service at the properties... the words they would use to describe their favorite hotel are the same words they'd use to describe themselves."<sup>3</sup>

The "personality" of each hotel draws from the style of a niche-oriented magazine that represents a target market. Examples include the Phoenix (Rolling Stone magazine), the Rex (*The New Yorker*), Nob Hill Lambourne (*Men's Health*), Hotel Avante (*Wired*), Wild Palms Hotel (*Fast Company*), Hotel Los Gatos (*Town and Country*), and the Water's Edge (*Yachting*). Some of the company's hotels are inspired by imaginative magazine hybrids. For instance, the Costanoa Coastal Lodge & Camp combines the grit of *Outside* magazine and the refinement of *Vanity Fair*. The Hotel Del Sol mixes the homeward focus of *Martha Stewart Living* with the adventure-laden *Islands* magazine. The Moorpark Hotel is a blend of style and savvy from *Esquire* and *Forbes*.



Joie de Vivre hotels also feature some unconventional, specialized amenities more in line with boutique properties. For instance, guests of the cinema-inspired Hotel Bijou are invited to view free San Francisco-based movies in a screening room just off the lobby. The in-house psychologist at the Hotel Acqua offers therapy sessions to relieve stress from the anxious traveler, and the Nob Hill Lambourne offers a homeopathic remedy bar, free vitamins, yoga videos, and algae shakes for breakfast. The

## Summary

With the economy still in a slump, Joie de Vivre hotels are on a mission to lift the spirits of both guests and staff.

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**Book-lined lobby of the Hotel Rex in San Francisco**

Hotel Rex has books on loan and poetry readings for guests with literary yearnings, while the Hotel Avante caters to corporate and technological creativity with an Executive Toy Box containing an Etch-A-Sketch, a Rubik's

cube, and other toys, tools, and puzzles.

### **Developing customer loyalty**

By providing an outlet for creativity, entertainment, relaxation, and problem solving, the atmosphere of any Joie de Vivre hotel is designed, as the namesake implies, to make guests feel good. "Identity refreshments" based on psychographic fits enable Joie de Vivre to make an emotional connection with its customers, and guests tend to be more loyal when they see the hotel product as an extension of themselves. As Conley states, "you do not only get inside the customer's head, you get inside his heart."<sup>4</sup>

This cannot be achieved through architecture, design, or image alone. In order to establish an enduring customer relationship, the dynamics of high-quality, personalized service are essential. Joie de Vivre's Dreammaker program encourages above-and-beyond service that delights customers with the unexpected.<sup>5</sup> The program helps employees hone in on potential "cheerleaders," customers inclined to spreading praise by word of mouth. Dreammaker services are meant to meet a guest's needs or desires even before they're voiced. Transcending Joie de Vivre's standards for exemplary guest service, employees are encouraged to pull a "dreammaker" act for a loyal, repeat guest or one who'd seem willing to spread the word. It's a unique way of showing guests that the hotel staff is as interested in them as the guests are in the hotel.

The personal touch even extends to the company's Web site. Yvette, the electronic hotel matchmaker, is programmed to anticipate individual tastes and preferences to help guests find the perfect hotel. Beyond the standard photos, customer ratings, and room rates to assist in the booking process, Yvette guides users through a set of five questions relating to their motivations and desires. The responses are then assessed to recommend Joie de Vivre properties that are likely to be ideally suited to that individual.<sup>6</sup>

### **A new corporate culture**



**Bar of the Aquarius hotel in Santa Cruz**

As Joie de Vivre grew from a few dozen employees to several thousand, Chip Conley knew he had to revolutionize the company's approach to corporate culture. The Joie de Vivre symbolic "heart" motif became central to the company's business model and is used in interviews, employee orientations, business strategy sessions, and holiday parties. Joie de Vivre's staff-authored mission statement urges "Creating opportunities to celebrate the joy of life." Mr. Conley sees himself on a quest to create dreams, describing his combined focus on personal values and the bottom line as "karmic capitalism." According to Mr. Conley, "my metric for success would not be how much money

I made, but how much joy I created for myself, my employees, and my customers."<sup>7</sup>

At Joie de Vivre, employee-driven decision making is the cornerstone to achieving continuous growth. The guest-centric culture empowers employees to do whatever it takes to meet and exceed expectations. Front-line employees are granted the freedom and flexibility to make proactive decisions that enhance the customer's hospitality experience.<sup>8</sup> The company even conjures the phoenix of innovation from the ashes of failure. To encourage employees to learn from mistakes, Joie de Vivre created the Magical Moments Failure Award, which is granted to the employee who comes up with the most creative way of solving a challenge.

Continuous professional development and a dynamic learning culture are priorities at Joie de Vivre. Few firms offer the sort of in-house training offered by Joie de Vivre. Joie de Vivre University was founded in January of 1997 to train and retain its workforce. The university offers a diverse curriculum designed to develop a wide spectrum of skills in management, computers, communication, and life/work balance. Classes include Team-Building through Clay Sculpture, English as a Second Language, and Profit and Loss Analysis.

## Conclusion

Each Joie de Vivre property is a confluence of distinctive design, unique amenities, and personalized service, supported by a corporate culture that rewards creative ideas and actions. In 2009, Joie de Vivre was honored for the fourth time as one of the top-ten "Best Places to Work in the Bay Area" by the *San Francisco Business Times* and the *Silicon Valley/San Jose Business Journal*. As the drear of the recession lags on, Joie de Vivre is not only well positioned to achieve its goals for future growth, but also light the way for a much needed "identity refreshment" for the hospitality industry at large.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hotel Online*, "Joie de Vivre Hospitality Makes Significant Personnel Changes; Allows for Strong Southern California Presence and New Commitment to Food & Beverage Operations," June 2008

[http://www.hotelonline.com/News/PR2008\\_2nd/Jun08\\_JDVExecs.html](http://www.hotelonline.com/News/PR2008_2nd/Jun08_JDVExecs.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jdvhotels.com/about>

<sup>3</sup> *Travel Agent Magazine*, "California Theming: San Francisco-based Joie de Vivre Hospitality is Creating Boutique Hotels that Echo the Personalities of their Guests," May 2002

<sup>4</sup> *Fast Company*, "Fast Talk: The Innovation Conversation," June 2001

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jdvhotels.com/about/development/dreammakers>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jdvhotels.com/press/release/42>

<sup>7</sup> Hotel Online, "Chip Conley, Founder of Joie de Vivre Hotels, Has Built Empire Working to Make People Happy," August 2009 [http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2009\\_3rd/Aug09\\_CConley.html](http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2009_3rd/Aug09_CConley.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jdvhotels.com/careers/culture/index>