



General Manager Mike Lerman

AC HOTEL

Hotel chains of the past may have been much more cut-and-dried, but the hotel of the future is tailored to its surroundings.

Before the AC Hotel in Sunnyvale reached final fruition in early 2019, most people stepping onto its construction site might not have seen beyond the power tools, ladders, and work benches. But general manager Mike Lerman strode across the same space and envisioned the polished lobby it now houses. To Lerman, the naked cement floors traversed by bright orange extension cords, were already robed in carpet; the walls, barren save for a sparse coat of primer, were already swathed in paint and adorned in tasteful art. Through his eyes, the space was expectant, patiently undergoing growing pains as it prepared for guests to grace its lobby.

“As you enter the building, there’s a beautiful white marble front desk that’s a simple statement piece (open so that the team can move around and engage visitors in the lobby),” Lerman described, long before the décor actually manifested. “There’s a custom piece of artwork behind the front desk that’s representing cherry branches under this beautiful gold metal.”

But what steps were taken to transform what was once the husk of a building into its present state as a welcoming and warm home away from home? Expectation and preparation are fundamental for a hotel to effectively fulfill the role of hospitable host. Lerman and the third-party hospitality management company he works for, Evolution Hospitality, strive to foresee the needs of visitors before it becomes necessary for them to ask. During construction, before the garage accommodated guests’ cars, it was temporarily converted into a storage space brimming with pallets of bedding, security safes, coffeemakers, and hundreds of other tiny little details to surpass guests’ expectations.

Staffing the hotel is another aspect of preparation handled by Lerman. “My main function [before the opening] is to find, recruit, hire, and develop really great people from as close to the project as possible so they really understand the area and the culture and that great context here,” he says.

As the point of entry into a new environment for travelers, a hotel must welcome visitors to an area and act as a kind of ambassador. Hotel chains of the past may have been much more cut-and-dried, but the hotel of the future is tailored to its surroundings.

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Lerman explains that the décor of this AC Hotel location is implicitly Bay Area-based. “The design of the public spaces is based on the origins of Sunnyvale and the cherry orchards that lined the valley,” he describes. “So the color scheme is reminiscent of the morning fog rolling through the branches, the cherry blossoms, the light soft colors.”

After opening, hospitality shifts from preparation to an intentional attentiveness to guests’ needs. Lerman switched focus to securing stability, opening and closing the house every day, ensuring clear communication amongst staff, and supporting the team. He adds, “We [create] a plan, [watch to] see if it works—and then we want to keep improving it so that we stay relevant.”

Lastly, authentic hospitality must be relational. “I actually think the more successful we are at home, the better work goes,” he notes. “I can bring my home life here, and we can talk about personal stuff.” Evolution Hospitality is of the same opinion—an authenticity that drew Lerman. “Our company is really good about saying, ‘Don’t check it at the door. You bring your humanness into the building.’” Employees are free to share the highs and lows of their lives. “We’ll work on that with you, and let’s go out and take care of people.”

Lerman notes that the act of humanizing is also a valuable reminder for guests. When a visitor approaches an employee with a problem and remembers that “there is a human on the other side of each interaction,” it allows that staff member to be much more creative and adequate in generating solutions. “The gentler you can come into that interaction, the more we want to serve you,” Lerman says. “It puts people naturally into fight or flight when we’re confronted or pinned to a wall in an interaction, and it makes it really hard to make a smart decision.” And really, what hardworking host isn’t motivated to deeper dedication by a little affirmation? 