Setting a New Benchmark

The merger of two iconic hospitality brands brings 70 properties under one guest- and partner-focused global brand.

Following the landmark merger of Benchmark Hospitality International and Gemstone Hotels & Resorts, the collective company has launched an expanded portfolio, new corporate identity, and four distinct brands.

Benchmark and Gemstone merged in July 2016. The result is a robust, more versatile, and effective global organization that combines the unique strengths of both companies under the new BENCHMARK name.

“This merger was a natural fit,” BENCHMARK CEO Alex Cabañas says. “Not only do we share a similar focus on unique and independent properties, but our organizational cultures and values also align extremely well.”

Gemstone brings a superb financial management system and personalized boutique hotels to the newly blended company, while Benchmark Hospitality International offers diverse resorts and conference centers, exceptional sales and marketing platforms, and the robust Workday human resources platform.

The new BENCHMARK includes more than 70 distinctive hotels, resorts, and conference centers, 8,000 guest rooms, and 10,000 employees. The company is managed by a combined team of highly respected and proven hospitality executives from both companies, which will create synergies and growth that will also provide development and advancement for our much-valued customers, employees, and team members.

“Passion, servant leadership, and an entrepreneurial spirit will remain at the foundation of our new combined company,” says Jeff McIntyre, Gemstone’s principal partner. “Together, we will combine efforts to offer best-in-class services for our partners.”

BEHIND THE NAMES

BENCHMARK’s Four New Brands

BENCHMARK RESORTS & HOTELS
The company’s existing signature portfolio of upscale hotels and resorts in the US and the Caribbean.

GEMSTONE COLLECTION
This new collection will encompass the properties of BENCHMARK’s Personal Luxury Resorts & Hotels and Gemstone’s Gemstone Hotels & Resorts.

BENCHMARK CONFERENCE CENTERS
Purpose-built conference centers and meeting venues that offer innovative spaces, service, and locally sourced cuisine. Each BENCHMARK Conference Center conforms to the requirements of IACC, the association that represents meeting venues and service globally.

OWNER ADVISORY GROUP (OAG)
Led by real estate professionals and hospitality executives, this platform offers owners asset management expertise in maximizing an asset’s value for profitability and valuation.
Big Addition, Same Culture

“The global growth of BENCHMARK continues with the Gemstone merger.”

In our 36-year history, I have always viewed the preservation of our “culture” at the highest risk on our value scale whenever we came close to doubling our size. In the past, we have twice managed the risk well and followed once—a misstep that took five years to correct. With Gemstone, from day one, we both know our cultures were not only aligned but would also strengthen each other.

On the business side of the equation, our goal was to maintain our exceptional property owner focus in independent resorts and hotels as we move through the process. We have actually enhanced our capabilities with a combination of skills, technology, and mutually respected relationships throughout the industry. Our first step before one public word would be uttered about the merger was to personally call and speak with every property owner representative so they might hear it first from us. No surprises.

Our first step before one public word was also to inform our own employees. Our own employees, our guests, and the owners of the properties we serve! Our employees, our guests, and the owners of the properties we serve! Our employees, our guests, and the owners of the properties we serve! Our employees, our guests, and the owners of the properties we serve! Nothing has been expanded with skilled technology and shared infrastructure. Nothing has weakened us, and our geographical reach has been expanded with skilled people and added technologies.

The future is brighter than ever for BENCHMARK. I continue to believe in our combined strength. Nothing has been expanded with skilled technology and shared infrastructure. Nothing has weakened us, and our geographical reach has been expanded with skilled people and added technologies.

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Meet the Leadership Team

The merger has brought together BENCHMARK’s new strategy team, featuring some fresh and some familiar faces.

ALEX CABANAÑAS
ROLE: Chief Executive Officer
ON THE JOB: Strategy, growth, and leadership development
AFTER HOURS: There isn’t an outdoor activity this father of two doesn’t enjoy.

GREG CHAMPION
ROLE: Co-President & Co-Chief Operating Officer
ON THE JOB: Oversees operations of all BENCHMARK projects in North America and the shared infrastructure.
AFTER HOURS: This two-time Ironman triathlon competitor is always up for a challenge.

JEFF MCINTYRE
ROLE: Co-President & Co-Chief Operating Officer
ON THE JOB: Oversees operations of all Gemstone Collection properties, Owner Advisory Group projects, and shared infrastructure.
AFTER HOURS: This guest instructor at four hotel schools loves racquetball, softball, and keeping up with his 12-year-old hockey-playing twins.

JARRAD EVANS
ROLE: Vice President of Business Development and Strategy
ON THE JOB: Leads strategic growth initiatives by developing and leveraging relationships with owners and equity partners.
AFTER HOURS: This father of two loves spending time with his kids, hiking, biking, skiing, food, wine, and traveling.

TED DAVIS
ROLE: Chief Sales & Marketing Officer
ON THE JOB: In addition to overseeing strategic sales and marketing initiatives, he runs the customer relationship management and sales training programs.
AFTER HOURS: He enjoys fly-fishing, hiking, and rooting for his Washington State Cougars.

KAREN DIFULGO
ROLE: Senior Vice President of Human Resources
ON THE JOB: Oversees all of the human resources operations, including staffing, benefits, compensation, training, and development.
AFTER HOURS: Serves as an executive board member of American Hotel and Lodging Association Women in Lodging.

KIRK JONES
ROLE: Chief Financial Officer
ON THE JOB: Oversees financial reporting, analysis, budgeting, and capital planning activities, in addition to the company’s financial assets.
AFTER HOURS: A college football fan and foodie who enjoys spending time with his family and boating.

ELLIE SINCLAIR
ROLE: Senior Vice President of Operations
ON THE JOB: Oversees and supports BENCHMARK’s resorts around the country and the Caribbean.
AFTER HOURS: Traveling to visit his daughter at college and time at the tee are among his favorite pastimes.

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JAN MCCORMICK
ROLE: Senior Vice President of Operations
ON THE JOB: Oversees and supports BENCHMARK’s resorts on the East Coast.
AFTER HOURS: This diver and lover of oceans serves on Virginia Tech’s Hotel and Travel Management School board of directors.

PAUL D’ANDREA
ROLE: Senior Vice President of Operations
ON THE JOB: This roughly 20-year employee of Gemstone leads the western states’ management teams and their properties.
AFTER HOURS: He may call Arizona’s deserts home, but this sailor loves trading sand for the open ocean when he visits the East and West coasts.

CEDRIC FASBENDER
ROLE: Senior Vice President of Operations
ON THE JOB: Provides operational support for BENCHMARK hotels, resorts, and conference centers around the country.
AFTER HOURS: This guitarist and family man has been a board member of the nonprofit Dream On Foundation, which helps disadvantaged youth, since 2002.

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Eaglewood Server Wins “Chairman’s Award of Excellence”

This nutrition-focused BENCHMARK employee has a long track record of community service and volunteerism, both at home and abroad.

This year’s recipient of BENCHMARK’s “Chairman’s Award of Excellence” is Kaitlin Soto, a restaurant and beverage cart server at Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Chicago, Illinois.

The award, which was created in 2005, annually recognizes one employee who has exhibited extraordinary service throughout the previous year.

“Passion for nutrition and education are evident in everything Kaitlin does profession-ally and personally,” BENCHMARK Chairman Burt Cabañas says. “Whether contributing her time to healthy eating programs for children at home or volunteering her time to help improve the lives of children in the West Indies, Kaitlin is tireless with her devotion to help people live healthier lives.”

Soto’s volunteerism and charitable efforts are extensive, which made her the clear choice for this year’s award.

With Sandals Foundation in the West Indies, Soto educated children and helped them learn healthy eating habits. She has also volunteered in similar roles throughout organizations and businesses in her community, including Loaves & Fishes Community Services and Feed My Starving Children, to increase child and adult healthy eating habits. She has a particular interest in nutrition and how it relates to cancer prevention.

Soto is also the 2013 “Nutrition Recognition Award” and 2015 “Nutrition Educator Award” winner from her alma mater, Benedictine University, although her efforts aren’t motivated by praise or personal accolades.

“I’ve been privileged to accomplish many initiatives involving academics, nutrition, and community service,” Soto says. “Throughout my blessed upbringing, I’ve met amazing people who have inspired me to push the limits and encourage others to follow. This is what drives me toward service to others.”

Waukesha County Tech Student Awarded Bob Zappatelli Scholarship

The scholarship annually pays tribute to the late BENCHMARK vice president of food and beverage, who was dedicated to advancing the culinary arts.

Brianna Miles, of Waukesha County Technical College in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, has been named this year’s winner of the Bob Zappatelli Culinary Arts Scholarship.

The scholarship, launched in 2009 as part of a partnership between BENCHMARK and the James Beard Foundation, celebrates the life and legacy of the late Bob Zappatelli, BENCHMARK’s first vice president of food and beverage. The annual scholarship serves as a memorial to Zappatelli’s enthusiasm for the advancement of the culinary arts and his championing of new culinary talent.

“We are delighted that Brianna has received this year’s Bob Zappatelli scholarship,” says Linda Cerra, general manager of The Council House and The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, where Miles is employed. “I can think of no one more worthy or determined to succeed in the culinary arts. She is a tribute to Bob Zappatelli’s legacy.”

Miles, an active member of the Army National Guard, is studying for her associate’s degree in Baking & Pastry Management. She expects to graduate in spring 2018.

“Being in a kitchen is more than just cooking for me; it is experimenting and creating where the possibilities are endless,” Miles says. “I find inner peace in the kitchen and in the creative process and have found my unique stride and happiness through the culinary arts.”
In-Sourcing a Multi-Million-Dollar Solution

Potential lost revenue is nearly a thing of the past for BENCHMARK, thanks to a big investment in reservation resources.

When companies look to increase their profit, one of the things many of them change is who – or what – is answering their calls. BENCHMARK is no different...but not in the way you think.

Early this decade, BENCHMARK estimated it was leaving hundreds of thousands of dollars on the table by using third-party services to handle reservation calls that BENCHMARK’s properties couldn’t answer. Unsatisfied with the fact that those third-party services were only converting 26 percent of their calls, and doing so without an intimate knowledge of the properties and destinations, BENCHMARK decided it was time to stop the outsourcing.

BENCHMARK opened the Global Revenue Support Center (GRSC) in 2012, renovating its home office to create an in-house support team that could be trained and managed far beyond any call center. It was a risk, both due to the cost of creating GRSC and because with it BENCHMARK would be more accountable to its independent property owners for any lost revenue. However, the move paid off. In 2013, the first full year, GRSC’s gross conversion was 32.1 percent of its 76,371 total calls and netted $616,344 more in revenue than a third-party service would have. Those numbers have continued to increase as GRSC has fully ramped up; in 2016, GRSC serviced 22 properties (some of which use GRSC for their primary reservations), and gross conversion was 36.3 percent of its more than 101,000 calls. In total, GRSC has yielded roughly $2 million in revenue between 2013 and 2016.

Vice President of Revenue Management Kim Nugent, who oversees the 11-employee GRSC, credits the success to training. GRSC’s staff includes a full-time trainer, and before any employee begins taking calls for a property, they spend two full weeks learning every facet of that destination so they can serve as a true extension of that property’s in-house reservation and concierge staff.

“The idea was built around our owners,” Nugent says, adding that the extensiveness of the training is especially important due to the Gemstone merger, as since then GRSC has added a new property every three weeks. “Our goal is to support the hotels and their team in growing revenue. This isn’t just some third party – we have interest in it.”

BENCHMARK’s Global Revenue Support Center

The Best List

Awards and recognition BENCHMARK received in 2016.

In order to lead an investment group through the road ahead, you have to be able to take a back seat as others on the ground steer the ship – or bike, as Jim O’Shaughnessy recently discovered while riding on the rear seat during a tandem 100-mile trip with his son.

As the manager of a $2.5 billion private portfolio that includes 18 hotels and counting, O’Shaughnessy is no stranger to giving his operational teams the autonomy to run his properties. It’s why Barings was confident it could (and did) survive the 2008 economic downturn by reinvesting in – instead of selling off – hotels like BENCHMARK’s Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado.

But not all investors or management companies share that leadership trait, which is why O’Shaughnessy says his company’s 19-year partnership with BENCHMARK – a partnership that includes the Copley Square Hotel in Boston – has been a refreshingly smooth ride.

“Without solid communication and teamwork, you can’t succeed,” O’Shaughnessy says.

Jim O’Shaughnessy
Managing Director, Hotel Group, at Barings Real Estate Advisers (Hartford, Connecticut)

Competition is more important than winning because...

“You don’t always win, but the ups and downs are reflections of real life that you can learn from.”

Guilty Pleasure

“Running, hiking, swimming, and anything else outside that frees my mind from the day to day.”
Grand Partnership

Monetary donations aren’t the only thing planned for a new Hometown Hospitality partnership with a nationally renowned mentorship program.

Each year as a part of the Hometown Hospitality program, employees throughout BENCHMARK create unforgettable moments by lending time to their local communities. Founded in 2001 as a grassroots project, the program has since become a key part of BENCHMARK each year.

One of the standout partnerships in 2016 was a company-wide collaboration with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Through charity events, in-kind donations and special events, including a contest at Doral Arrowwood in which employees paid to throw pies at their bosses, BENCHMARK raised more than $100,000 to help the national nonprofit, which has been integrating and connecting the community for more than 100 years.

Some properties also participated in workplace mentoring, where local students shadowed BENCHMARK employees. In addition to raising $100,000, the goal of the 2016 partnership was to lay the foundation for mentorship opportunities at all of BENCHMARK’s properties.

“Hometown Hospitality isn’t about just writing checks,” says Tom Cupo, one of the leaders of BENCHMARK’s Hometown Hospitality program. “It’s about continuing to be involved in our communities in order to make them a better place to live.”

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