

GM INTERVIEW: IFTIKHAR HAMDANI

The accidental champion

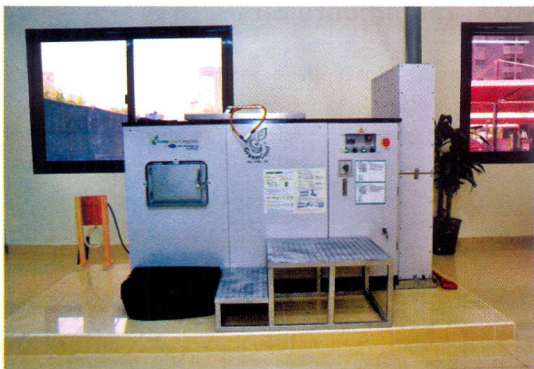
As general manager of Ramada Hotel & Suites Ajman and *Hotelier Middle East's* Highly Commended CSR Champion of the Year 2013, **Iftikhar Hamdani** proves GMs can run a green hotel without compromising on guest service

When Iftikhar Hamdani took over the reins of the Ramada Hotel and Suites Ajman in 2009, the brief was not to radically change the hotel's environmental sustainability practices. Instead, upon taking the helm, Hamdani was tasked with turning the struggling resort in the northern emirates into a profitable property.

"I came in as director of sales. At that time, the business was not good," he recalls. "The location, Ajman, and the inventory of 388 rooms meant it was definitely difficult to fill this property. So when I joined, I took the lead and improved occupancy. So the hotel was doing well in business and later the management decided to promote me when the general manager moved to Dubai," says Hamdani.

"When I became the leader of the largest property in the Northern Emirates, for me, at that stage, the main challenge was cost because the electricity bills were coming up to AED 549,000 (US \$149,469). So I would set all the revenues, but on the other side, cost was really high. So that was a turning point for me, to move towards sustainability," he explains.

When he started looking at cutting down costs, Hamdani realised the hotel's largest expenses came from utilities, especially water and electricity. "These were the basic things for any general manager to look into because this was a really big expense but there was nothing really in my mind at that time to do something for the environment; it was mainly to see how I can increase the bottom line," Hamdani admits candidly.



➡ The hotel produces its own compost that it can use or sell.

One of the key issues Hamdani faced was long-stay guests leaving air conditioners running while away at work. "We have more than 100 companies staying with us

Stat attack

388

ROOMS AT THE HOTEL

3

TOWERS IN THE COMPLEX

280

STAFF EMPLOYED BY THE HOTEL

430M²

SIZE OF THE URBAN FARM

105,000

ROOM NIGHTS IN 2012

AED 265,000

COST OF COMPOST MACHINE

AED 65,000

COST OF CONVERTING THE HOTEL'S 'GREEN ROOM'



➡ Ramada Ajman GM Iftikhar Hamdani.

“Spreading awareness has really helped because now we are getting bookings as a green hotel”

and they are away at work for 12 hours so during the day they would leave the AC running. So that was a big issue — why did they need to leave the AC on all day? We asked if they could be switched on again one hour before the guests returned so that was a huge saving,” he recalls.

“There were no complaints from them either because we would always switch on the AC one hour before they returned. After all these exercises we reached AED 325,000, which was almost a 50% reduction. Even now, with 100% occupancy, our bill never crosses AED 325,000,” he adds.

MANAGING WASTE

While reducing electricity and water consumption was a strategic decision for Hamdani, it also sparked an interest in sustainability practices that could decrease costs while reducing the hotel's environmental footprint. One of the key initiatives the hotel introduced as a result was the zero landfill project, whereby the



➡ One of the hotel's car parks was turned into a vegetable garden.

hotel aims to recycle or reuse more than 90% of its entire waste and not use landfills at all.

"I read in a newspaper that Ajman throws 600 tonnes of garbage daily so I asked our chef and house-keeping department what our contribution was and nobody knew. So on January 1, 2012 we had the first meeting and decided to target zero landfill. I explained to them that we have a lot of waste and we pay AED 120,000 per annum to AIMS waste management. We met with them in January and we were surprised to find out that we produced 800-1000kg of waste per day; almost one tonne," says Hamdani.

In a bid to cut down its waste, the hotel turned to measures such as recycling, which was never previously practiced, as well as other initiatives such as paperless reports electronically transferred between department heads. Hamdani and his team also realised the biggest waste generator at the hotel was the kitchen, which contributed almost 600kg of waste to the hotel's output.

"We contacted another company called Green Mountain, who suggested we get a composter machine and that was a learning point for us because we had no idea about compost machines or how to compost waste. So we bought one of the best machines we could find from Green Good in Korea and we were able to convert organic waste into fertiliser, which we use here or can even sell," he says.

The hotel's 'green room', which holds the compost machine, has attracted the attention of other hotels in the country, with teams from Atlantis The Palm, Rotana and the Al Maha Resort all visiting the property to learn from it.

Another initiative which has earned the hotel a lot of attention is the 430m² urban farm, located in what used to be one of the hotel's car parks, but which now grows seasonal vegetables that are served at the hotel's restaurants.

GUEST STRATEGY

Educating new and existing guests has also been an important part of the hotel's strategy to switch over to green practices.

"Most of our guests are long stay and educating them was very difficult, so I had dedicated staff in the reception area training them and informing them of our practices along with a representative from Green Good, who also explained to them how the guests can contribute."

As a result, the changes haven't gone unnoticed by travellers. "The reception has been tremendous, the guests are very happy," exclaims Hamdani.

"We have a dedicated guest relations person who shows guests our green initiatives, and we are now getting bookings as a green hotel," he concludes. ■