Ideas for Hotel Developers & Operators

Arne Sorenson Might Be Moving Into CEO Role, But Bill Marriott’s Personal Touch Will Continue To Be Felt

Lasting Legacy
Upscale extended-stay chain Homewood Suites recently introduced a next-generation prototype that’s smaller and less expensive to build than previous incarnations of the product. The Gen 9 prototype, which is currently being rolled out for new projects, gives developers an opportunity to build Homewoods on slightly smaller or oddly shaped land parcels.

While the differences between the seven-year-old Gen 8 and the new Gen 9 prototypes will help developers’ bottom lines, brand executives say the changes will be barely visible to guests. That was one of the key goals of the project.

“We wanted to update the product, but we had to make sure the guest-facing experience remains intact,” says Bill Duncan, global head of brand management for Homewood and its Home2 Suites sister brand. “We’ve received a lot of validation from our guests on the experience they receive and the space our product offers to them. That had to stay intact.”

One significant change with the new prototype is replacing the separate, single-story lodge structure with one that’s integrated into the main building and tucked under a bank of guest units. The overall size of the lodge facility doesn’t change, however.

“We couldn’t skimp on this space because it’s the center of activity for many of our guests,” says Dawn Koenig, vice president of brand performance support, who adds that 87% of guests eat continental breakfast in the lodge, and 65% have evening dinner and drinks there on Monday through Friday. While the size of the lodge stays the same, the new prototype has a fitness center that at 650 square feet is about double the size of the facility in Gen 8 hotels. “Our research has shown fitness to be very important to our guests and the new center allows them to maintain the kind of lifestyle they enjoy at home.”

Changes in the new prototype shave about 11,000 square feet off the building, reduce land requirements by about 20% and the overall building area by 20%. Construction costs are reduced by 10%-15% and overall per-key development cost is between 4% and 6% lower, say Homewood executives.

The prototype has fewer units (109 keys versus 123 in previous editions) and 12 fewer parking spaces. One of the big changes involves the mix of guest units. Gen 9 hotels will have 60% king studios and 40% king suites, whereas the previous product featured a 50/50 split in suite types. The change reflects customer feedback on the Homewood product.

“Many guests love the open-floor concept of the studios,” says Duncan. “Through research we heard from guests that when they’re on the road and away from family, they feel confined. The studio suites give them a sense of open space.”

The studio suite was redesigned from a rectangle into an L-shape, with the long part of the L a little wider than in the previous designs. And while the unit is smaller by 27 square feet, Koenig says its nearly square shape makes it hard to tell that it’s smaller. Another change in the unit is the elimination of the desk, which brand management realized guests weren’t using. In its place is a single table.
that can be used as a desk, activity surface or for dining.

Other changes are in store for the Homewood brand, some of which are fueled by trends in residential design the brand wants to adopt where feasible in its lodging product. For example, the standard for new Homewoods or those undergoing changes in ownership or product improvement plans will be stainless steel kitchen appliances. (The change creates one minor operational challenge as management will need to relocate the nightly dinner and drinks menu that it previously attached to the refrigerator by magnet. Stainless steel doesn’t have the same magnetic properties as other metal refrigerators.)

The chain is also experimenting with all-white bedding and a coverlet instead of duvet. One Alabama hotel is testing the new bedding and several more will follow. “We’ll test these concepts for 120 to 180 days because it’s very important to understand what impact such a change will have on the laundry and the time it takes to clean the suites,” says Koenig. Another possible change is integrating reading lights into each bed’s upholstered headboards.

While most new Homewoods will feature the Gen 9 specs, Duncan says the changing development environment means owners want opportunities for more flexibility. As a result, the new prototype and its concepts are scalable and can be optimized to fit individual needs and challenges of specific projects.

“We’re no longer just offering six fixed packages. We intend to inspire, not require,” says Duncan. “We have standards and guidelines on the look for the product, but we’re able to work with our owners and their designers to create a concept that looks appropriate and works in whatever market they’re developing in. We found that sometimes our owners can be more nimble and cutting edge than can the brand.”

The first Gen 9 property opens later this year in Joplin, MO. Overall, the brand hopes to open between 12 and 15 hotels in 2012. While many will be in standard suburban locations, Duncan says the chain is reviewing several proposals for adaptive reuse or new-build projects in urban centers. Canada is another growth area with 10 properties open and three new signed deals.

— Ed Watkins