

LODGING

ON THE MONEY

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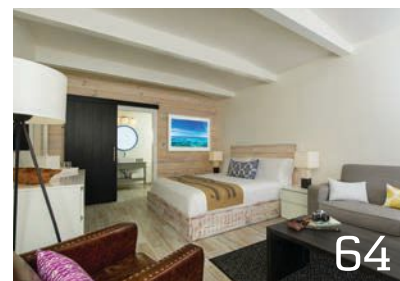
FROM AWARD-
WINNING BRANDS

JOHN BORTZ
CHAIRMAN AND CEO
PEBBLEBROOK HOTEL TRUST

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WEB EXCLUSIVE



Niki Leondakis on Boutique Brands and Commune's New Projects

As small independents and big box chains introduce new boutique and lifestyle brands, consumer awareness grows even stronger around this booming segment. In order to stand out from the crowd, hotels need to create a genuine sense of discovery and uniqueness for their target customers, says Niki Leondakis, CEO of Commune Hotels and Resorts.

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FRONT DESK

NEWS, IDEAS, AND INSIGHTS

SUCCESS STORY

Boutique Chic

YVONNE LEMBI-DETERT'S FLAIR FOR FASHION MAKES THE PERSONALITY HOTELS COLLECTION STAND OUT

BY CASEY GALE

WHILE WALKING TO HER OFFICE LAST FEBRUARY, Yvonne Lembi-Detert spotted two fashion-forward women coming out of the Hotel Diva in San Francisco and she just had to say hello. The Diva, one of seven California properties in Lembi-Detert's Personality Hotels collection, doubles as her corporate office. And, as the company name suggests, Lembi-Detert is all about personality when it comes to making her boutique properties stand out—hence her excitement over the encounter. “I introduced myself, and the one lady gave me a big hug and said, ‘Oh, it’s just so *fabulous* to know that a woman owns this hotel,’” Lembi-Detert recalls.

“I didn’t even think twice about being nervous or excited, because I was already involved so passionately.”

The guests said it takes a woman’s touch to make such a hotel happen, and Lembi-Detert was quick to point out the truth in their words. As a woman in a male-dominated industry, she has made a unique mark in hospitality for the past 32 years. It was a career choice that snuck up on her while she was studying design and marketing in college. During a visit with her father, Frank Lembi, a real estate executive at San Francisco-based Skyline Realty, she expressed her distaste for the design color boards of one of his hotel projects. Her father asked if she could do a better design job. “I remember holding those color boards and thinking, ‘OK, do I grow up now, take the challenge? Or do I turn it down?’”

Not yet a college graduate, Lembi-Detert chose to jump in with both feet. She hired a designer and went to work, attending night school in addition to her regular classes to learn more about hospitality. “I didn’t even think twice about being nervous or excited, because



PICTURE PERFECT

Yvonne Lembi-Detert's eye for design gives all of her properties a unique personality.

I was already involved so passionately,” she says. “I didn’t even have a vision that this would be a boutique hotel.” Lembi-Detert’s dedication paid off in 1982 when she opened Hotel Union Square, transforming a nearly 70-year-old building into a chic boutique hotel. And she was just 22 years old when it opened.

Over the next few years, Lembi-Detert acquired more properties at the suggestion of her father, and built a family-owned hotel collection. With each acquisition, she worked side by side with a designer to define the property’s character and bring it to life. To make The Diva stand out, for instance, Lembi-Detert drew inspiration →

The Hotel Union Square was Lembi-Detert's first property.



Kensington Park Hotel's lobby offers glamorous seating for guests.



GOOD ADVICE

YVONNE LEMBI-DETERT

SHARES THREE TIPS FOR WOMEN
LOOKING TO BREAK INTO THE
HOTEL INDUSTRY:

- 1 **Empower other women.** "I think that since the cavemen days, women have 'worked' in hospitality. We give birth to children, we cradle them, and we make a home. You can't avoid it; it's the truth."
- 2 **Be a fighter and take risks.** "I find that women apologize too much. Just speak up, be direct, and no apologies are needed."
- 3 **Be yourself.** "If you're opening a boutique hotel and there's something about your personality worth showing off, be yourself and be passionate about it."

↓
from the 1981 film of the same name, incorporating metal into the design and playing up her love of fashion. She even recruited a local graffiti artist to offer his interpretation of what it means to be a modern diva in San Francisco and prominently displayed the piece in the hotel's meeting space. It was a challenge, but she was undeterred. "I like challenges," she explains. "If there's something really negative about the building, how are

we going to turn it around? If there's something really positive, how are we going to accentuate it? I like figuring that out."

Lembi-Detert's story sounds a bit like a fairy tale, but her road to success was also paved with struggles. In 2010, three Personality Hotels—The Hotel Vertigo, Hotel Frank, and Hotel Metropolis—

foreclosed as a result of the economic downturn. The "bold education" it provided became invaluable to Lembi-Detert's survival in the hotel industry. "It could make you this tough, angry person," she says, "but it made me more human."

Having come out the other side in a thriving industry, Lembi-Detert aspires to expand to Los Angeles and maybe even Cuba someday. For now, the repeat guest comments on the personality and character of her hotels will be enough to keep her going. "That's the gasoline for me—hearing how people are so honestly satisfied with the creativity and knowing that there's a piece of me."