



Thinking local

As I see it **Gordon Lozeman**

President, Banff Caribou Properties

There is a new reality playing out in Banff's tourism industry—one that the recession is accelerating and one that is changing the game for hotel owners. The more conservative, mature international traveler that Banff has traditionally depended on, especially in the critical summer season, is staying home while the demand from the local market—Calgary and Edmonton—particularly on the weekends, is growing.

“This whole concept of ‘stay-cation’ seems to be the new reality,” says Gordon Lozeman, President of hotel and entertainment company Banff Caribou Properties. “Banff is so different now than it was ten years ago. People still think that Asia is our key market, and that Banff is over-priced and over-crowded. None of this is true,” says Lozeman. “Our customer is much more regional; our hotels, restaurants and retail stores have to compete with other regional destinations; and we’re having to re-invent ourselves as a town to appeal to our regional traveler. That means becoming more animated, creating more amenities and events and improving the pedestrian and trail experiences. We’re getting there.”

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As a company, Banff Caribou Properties is dealing with these challenges by focusing on creating value for its guests in new, innovative ways. “We know people are looking for a deal now more than ever, so we want to address this need,” says Lozeman. “It doesn’t always have to be through price. We can also create value through unexpected benefits such as free transit buses, free local calls or entertainment. We want all of our guests to leave happy.”

Over the last number of years, the hotel and entertainment company has also been building a different hotel product – one that its regional market wants. That means larger units, kitchen facilities, and a much more residential feel. “Instead of the standard room with two queen beds and a lamp, we are building a much more ‘suite’ product,” says Lozeman. “It’s really helped us through the recession.”

That type of innovation is a tough sell in an industry governed by deep-rooted practices, but it is one Banff Caribou Properties is committed to. “Innovation based on consumer wants and demand will continue to play a critical role in moving the company forward,” says Lozeman. “We believe that we need to do things differently if we want to get ahead. I mean, do you really need to put that same ‘save-the-environment-by-reusing-towels’ message in every single room? We prefer to stop patronizing our guests and tell the truth – ‘yes, it saves the environment, but it also saves us money!’”

“Innovation is really just having the audacity to do things differently. It’s coming up with resourceful ideas and solutions that don’t cost a lot of money but that are not standard; that give people something to talk about. In the world of social media that we’re living in today, giving people something to talk about is probably our greatest marketing tool,” says Lozeman.

In order to foster an environment that encourages innovation and creativity, Lozeman has put together a staff of creative, resourceful people—many of whom come from other industries—who don’t take themselves too seriously and who know their contributions will be acted upon. Those contributions have led to a free bus-pass program for guests to replace the traditional hotel shuttle and a grotto hot pool built to replicate the hole-in-the-ground hot pools that were the beginnings of Banff and the whole National Park system, for example.

“What really helps is that we are consumers of our own product, so we can constantly assess what we like and what we don’t like in the world of travel. If it bugs us when we travel, we assume that it will bug most travelers,” says Lozeman. “That’s why we’ve taken the approach of not trying to nickel-and-dime our guests with parking charges, local phone charges or exorbitant long-distance charges. We don’t like them as consumers, so we’re not going to make our own customers pay for them. We assume that if something makes us laugh, then it will make our guests laugh. That’s why you get things like the sound of an elk bugle when you dial *44 in any of our rooms.”

“At the end of the day, innovation is about bright people making bold moves to stay ahead of the curve,” says Lozeman. “Or maybe we just need more people coming for a vacation in Banff. It’s guaranteed to inspire innovation...”