



ALEXANDER MIRZA
 AGE: 37
 SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT
 HILTON HOTELS CORP.
 BEVERLY HILLS

IN HIS PREVIOUS LIFE as a management consultant, Alexander Mirza spent many a night in hotels—some definitely better than others. “You suffer through all the indignities and you figure out which are the good ones,” he says.

Now, as senior vice-president of corporate development for Beverly Hills, Calif.-based Hilton Hotels Corp., Mirza, 37, has the task of ensuring the chain’s hotels are worthy of being on top of any road-warrior executive’s list of places to stay.

The Toronto native, who has an MBA from Harvard Business School and master’s and bachelor’s degrees from Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont., more or less fell into the hotel business through experience rather than design. He had a keen interest in international issues, and “thought I’d be going into the foreign service.” After Queen’s, he started his career at First Financial Inc., opening its first U.S. office serving high-net-worth clients. After his MBA, he worked with consultants Deloitte/Braxton Associates, managing projects related to growth and globalization. Consulting, especially at a worldwide firm, is a great way to get international experience. “It’s important to work for a global company with a global culture,” he says.

Later, he became a principal at Strategos, a consulting firm, working with executives in the luxury hospitality and consumer industries. He became fascinated with the potential of the hotel business. “There is a real opportunity for leadership,” he says, noting the industry is ripe for consolidation and innovation. After Strategos, Mirza headed strategic planning at Starwood Hotels

and Resorts, which includes the W and Sheraton lines. He later went to Accenture, as an executive consultant in the travel and transportation sector. But the lure of management was strong. Indeed, Mirza’s advice to consultants is to get back into managing after a few years. “Beyond that, it damages you—you become a great thinker and strategist, but markets change,” he says.

In November 2005, Mirza took the newly created job at Hilton—his office is just around the corner from the flagship Beverly Hilton and its legendary Trader Vic’s. Mirza is responsible for developing products and services, including food and beverages, health clubs and spas, and his mission is to grow market share and profits by partnering with leading brands. Hilton owns, manages or franchises about 2,300 hotels, resorts and vacation ownership properties, and its brands include Hilton, Doubletree, Embassy Suites and Hampton Inns & Suites.

Mirza points out that food and beverages represent about 30% of Hilton’s revenue—about US\$3 billion annually—making it “one of the biggest restaurant companies in the world.” So focusing on that part of the business is an important opportunity. As well, he says, spas are becoming a larger source of revenue, as a more sophisticated clientele—boomers, in particular—are increasingly attracted to “luxury experiences.”

Bringing luxury to more moderately priced hotels is one of the opportunities for Hilton and others, Mirza says, because top-notch fitness centres, restaurants and spas are all part of superior service. While room features like nice comfy mattresses are great, Mirza says, “honestly, what you remember—especially a business traveller—is great, great service.”

ZENA OLIJNYK

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