INSIDE VIEW:

CREATING A WOW WITH THE PERSONAL TOUCH

A CONVERSATION WITH SANJAY KUMAR HOTEL DIRECTER OF GRANDEUR OF THE SEAS

by

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As Hotel Director of Royal Caribbean International's Grandeur of the Seas, Sanjay Kumar has approximately 650 crew members in his department. They range from entertainers to chefs to cabin stewards and, as seen below, Kumar is quite proud of them, believing that they are largely responsible for the ship's popularity.

Mr. Kumar worked his way up through the ranks to his present position. Born and raised in Mumbai, India, he worked in a five-star restaurant while studying for his degree in hospitality. "I hardly used to sleep," he laughs, but he was spurred on because he "had a great passion for cooking."

After working for one of the leading hotels in Mumbai, Kumar came to Royal Caribbean as a chef and served on Nordic Empress and Sovereign of the Seas before coming to Grandeur. Shifting over to management, Kumar was Food and Beverage Manager on Grandeur for a year and a half before being promoted to his present position.

Being the Hotel Director on Grandeur, Kumar is charged with delivering the "Wow Factor" that Royal Caribbean seeks to bring to its guests' vacation experience. But Royal Caribbean is known for its giant ships and its advertising often emphasizes features found on those ships such as the ice skating shows, the surfing simulator, the Royal Promenade, and the Johnny Rocket's diners. While not a small ship in absolute terms, Grandeur of the Seas is comparatively smaller than her fleetmates (*e.g.*, she is less than half the size of Freedom of the Seas in gross tonnage). Moreover, she does not have the features listed above. Nonetheless, Grandeur is able to wow the guests.

"Royal Caribbean has five different classes of vessels - - Freedom class, Voyager class, Radiance class, Vision class and Sovereign class. But every ship, every class of vessel has its unique experience. In a bigger ship, they have more things to do whereas here it is a smaller ship, which [provides] more of an [opportunity] for my crew members to 'wow' the guests. The way that we wow them is through the personal touch. We have interpersonal skills and that is why we are winners. We win them through the personal touch. At the end of the day, people know you by name.

You see the person at least two or three times a day. I think it is a positive advantage for us. We do not have the luxury of ice skating but what we have is the luxury of interpersonal customer service - - the greeting and smiling, owning the problem. There is an intimacy here."

"Week after week we get comments from the guests saying 'this is a great ship.' I have a huge amount of repeat guests onboard the ship. Usually, we get more than a thousand [repeat] guests, last time we had 1,500 [out of a capacity of approximately 2,000]. The reason being not me but all the crew members around - - they make it happen. The friendly service and the helpfulness that they have is genuine. That is the reason people come again and again."

"Before they book a cruise, [repeat guests often] look to see who are the crew members. When they come to the ship it is always: 'Is John in the dining room, is Rita there in the gift shop?' What does that mean? That means they have such a connection [to the ship]. That is what we try to emphasize here - - to build a connection. Once that connection is there, they are with us - - a genuine connection. They follow the crew members, they follow the itinerary and most importantly, they feel comfortable on the ship when they know the ship. If they want to do ice skating or whatever, they will go somewhere else. Whereas here, they come again to us just because they love the ship."

Because so much depends upon the crew's attitude, motivating the crew is a key role of senior management. "Everybody has their own way. My way is pretty much being open and interactive with the crew. I walk around, talk around and [am] out there. When they come onboard, we have a welcome onboard meeting. There are five team members of the executive committee and we go there and we tell them who we are, what the ship is like, where we are coming from and what is expected from them. Being straightforward and honest - - I think the secret to success is just to be visible around and walk the talk. If I say after six [o'clock] all crew members have to be in a certain uniform, I have to make sure that I am wearing the same thing too. When it is so visible, the people working on the cruise ship see it and know it is not a fake. It becomes a part of their being too, automatically it becomes that."

Another motivating factor is Grandeur's itinerary. "We have a lot of different itineraries. This year, we started off with cruises from Tampa, then we did two weeks transition cruise Tampa to San Juan and San Juan to Norfolk, and then from

Hotel Director Sanjay Kumar

Norfolk we came to Baltimore. In Baltimore, we are doing three different itineraries also - - nine day cruise going to the Caribbean, nine day cruise going to Canada, and five day cruise to Bermuda. Then, in the autumn, we are heading back to Tampa which is a 14 or 15 day cruise. Those are all different itineraries. It keeps us really active and it motivates us - - change is always that."

Different itineraries attract different demographics. The summer Bermuda and Caribbean cruises tended to attract young families with children while the autumn cruises to Canada attract an older clientele. "We get to know the age demographic ahead of time so we know how to cater to them. We cater according to the guest demographics. We need to change our shows according to that. We cannot have the same high upbeat music when we go to Canada. With an elderly clientele, their needs are a little different. Sometimes they ask for something, they like piping hot maybe. We are fine with that. That is why we are here. They are early birds so we have to open the Windjammer

somewhat earlier. Instead of opening at seven o'clock, maybe open a half hour early. The same goes for the dining room. Instead of opening at seven thirty, we open earlier. So, we cater according to their needs."

Catering to the guests' needs also involves briefing the crew so that they can answer guests' questions. For example, before beginning a new itinerary, "we prepare our crew members - - what is there in Bermuda to see, what is there in Baltimore, what is the closest museum, how much is a taxi ride from here to downtown, in Halifax, what is there - - just a few tips so they can talk. Not only that but we put a Power Point presentation on the Crew Channel [on the ship's television system] so they are fully aware of the ports of call where we are going and what is there for the guests - - some basic general knowledge for them. There is a daily briefing and we keep educating them."

Even the most highly motivated crew would not be able to make a ship a success if the physical condition of the ship was not good. While Grandeur of the Seas entered service in late 1996, her crisp, clean interior belies her age. "How do you keep a 13 year old ship looking crisp? It does not look brand new but it does not look worn out either. It is in very good shape. The key to this is constantly taking care of the ship. We have a department called the Facilities Department and they are constantly doing the maintenance, the upkeep of the ship. You have seen them walking around, dedicated teams taking care of that. It is constant monitoring, doing inspections, and walking around. Every crew member knows just call 1800 and report what the problem is and we will fix it right away."

"We take pride in competing with newer ships too. If we dock tomorrow in Bermuda and the next ship is a brand new ship and the guests come from there to here, we want to give a wow experience to them. When they come to the ship, we want them to have a feeling of wow, knowing it is a 13 year old ship. When they go back to their own ship, maybe that is a two year old ship [and] naturally it is going to glitter but when you compare between 13 and 2, I think we are going to be in [the] upper scale"