

INDUSTRY INSIDER

Q&A with Jason Brown

By Stefani C. O'Connor
Executive News Editor

Heading into his fifth year with **Yotel**, Chief Development Officer Jason Brown is focused on the eclectic, technology-led hotel company's global growth and development strategy, leading the acquisitions and development teams responsible for sourcing, negotiating and closing joint-venture agreements, acquisitions and management contracts for new projects. The veteran hospitality executive also manages the design and construction teams responsible for working with Yotel's owners and development partners on the hotels, whose rooms are described as cabins, inspired by first-class accommodations on airlines.

Prior to joining Yotel, Brown served in several executive positions with Kimpton Hotel & Restaurant Group, LLC, and was part of the founding team at luxury destination club One Key, and served with Ernst & Young in its transaction real estate and hospitality group.

How would you characterize Yotel right now in how it's shaping its portfolio? We're focused, first and foremost, on building projects that deliver outstanding value, both in terms of strong investment returns to our owners and partners and seamless, value-driven, yet luxury, experiences for our guests. We've chosen to employ a flagship strategy, developing the concept in what we see as the hubs of the regions around the globe that are young at heart and technology forward with strong demand/supply dynamics: North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. We've also utilized a "kit of parts" approach whereby the items that are must-haves—i.e., the club lounge concept, check-in kiosks, smart beds, techno walls, etc.—always appear but how they are designed is localized through working with long-term partners that see the world the same way we do.

Yotel currently has two products based on location: airport and city hotels. How do these differ? Yotel Air sits within the airport terminal, meaning passengers can check into their flight and then enjoy either a

night's stay or a quick refresh. We are developing a mini Club Lounge at Yotel Air sites, where guests can work collaboratively, dine when they please with our self-vending wall or socialize before their flights. At our city-center sites, the cabins are slightly larger, and we have made sure transport links are easily reached, so guests can explore their surroundings even if they only have a short time to visit. The public spaces include terraces, pools, gyms and event spaces, so there are loads of options for activities even within the hotel.

Yotel has hotels at London Gatwick, London Heathrow and Amsterdam Schiphol, and is adding airport properties at Paris Charles de Gaulle this year and at Singapore Changi in 2018. You have an NYC Yotel open and are planning city hotels in Brooklyn, NY; Miami; San Francisco; and Singapore. Is Yotel being more opportunistic or more strategic in making these distribution decisions? We tend to have a blended approach of understanding where Yotel is most needed and well suited for travelers [while] also taking advantage of great opportunities as they arise. With Air sites, we work closely with the airport to determine where they would like more traffic, how Yotel will fit with their business model and where they are in the airport-planning process. [Other airports on its radar include Atlanta, Miami, Madrid and Frankfurt.] With city-center sites, we plan to build on the enormous success of our Yotel NYC, which is a key flagship location for us, to expand further in North America... The Singapore location will act as a springboard for expansion into Asia and Dubai.

Are there signature standards/features that may be found in each location? Technology, and using it to enhance and simplify the guest experience, is the focus across our entire hotel brand. We ensure that at whichever hotel guests stay at, they benefit from our unique perks, such as SmartBeds with Serta gel mattresses that slide to allow for more cabin space when they are not in use, and monsoon rain showers. We enable our guests to work or play as they choose with free, super-fast



WiFi, flat-screen TVs and self-service kiosks that allow check-in whenever they choose.

Airport sites feature hourly booking systems. What's the average stay at an airport Yotel compared to a city Yotel? The average stay length in Air sites is seven hours, whereas in New York it is 2.5 nights. For an airport guest, our flexible booking is critical and key to the sites' success. In our next two airport hotels the mini Club Lounge will enable this further.

Are there any plans to become even more tech-oriented to attract upcoming generations of both business and leisure travelers? One example of this is our mobile app, already available at our New York City site. The app allows guests to digitally interact with the hotel before, during and after their stay. Guests can check in via the app, which generates a bar code to your

smartphone. The bar code is scanned at the kiosk and the cabin keys and receipt are issued. The app also allows guests to view reservation details, request a late checkout and receive messages from the hotel announcing events or special offers. Guests can also use the app to access a curated list of places to visit. In terms of future developments, we are focused on Yotel's BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) approach. Due to the rate at which technology goes out of date, many hotels struggle to really provide what guests need or want; therefore, at Yotel, guests also can use Bluetooth to connect with the other technology available... We are talking to some new, very exciting food and beverage partners that will help us to provide a 24/7 offering in our public spaces and allow guests to order food to go via the app. At our airport sites, we are looking into providing seamless ticketing options and automated changes in bookings if airlines are experiencing delays. **HB**

