

# Kemmons Wilson: An American Original

By Robert M. O'Halloran, Ph.D.

## Introduction

The American novelist, Sinclair Lewis writing in 1920 said: "Somewhere in these United States there is a young man who is going to become rich. He will start a chain of small, clean, and pleasant hotels-standardized and nationally advertised. There will be one at every important motor route. He will not waste money on gilt and onyx. They will have agreeable clerks, good coffee, and enduring mattresses. In every hotel he will have at least one suite which is as good as the average room in a modern city hotel. He will invade every town that does not have a good hotel already" ([www.kemmonswilson.com](http://www.kemmonswilson.com)). Kemmons Wilson was 7 years old at that time and how right Sinclair Lewis was. Kemmons Wilson is now often referred to as the father of the modern hotel or innkeeping industry, truly an American original. Much has been written about him and his accomplishments. Time magazine once noted in a cover story, "Kemmons Wilson has transformed the motel from the old wayside fleabag into the most popular home away from home", ("The Father of the Modern Innkeeping Industry" <http://www.kwilson.com/kw/>).

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Figure 1. Kemmons Wilson Time Magazine Cover  
(Photo courtesy of the Kemmons Wilson Companies)

Kemmons Wilson was a leader. Through his actions he defined what have been described as the foundations of leadership including, communication, trust, vision and perseverance (Cichy and Singerling, 1997). Additionally, many of the keys to leadership as described in a 1997 study highlight his career accomplishments. Some of these keys include trust your people and partners, developing a vision, simplify and encouraging risk (adapted from Cichy & Singerling, 1997). Leaders are people that see the opportunity and take an organization into new frontiers and Kemmons Wilson was a leader of a new era of the hospitality field.

This article will profile the career of Kemmons Wilson as a leader and as a person, highlighting key characteristics and traits that made his success possible. No article can contain everything about Kemmons Wilson's life but this discussion will profile an icon of American business and focus on the framework his ef-

orts created for our industry and its future leaders and what will be referred to as the Kemmons Wilson brand. The framework for his actions as an innovator, leader, entrepreneur, partner, global brand manager, decision-maker and education patron will be utilized to connect his historical contributions with the current and future needs of our industry.

## History: Charles Kemmons Wilson

Charles Kemmons Wilson was born to Kemmons Wilson, an insurance man, and Ruby "Doll" Wilson, in Osceola, Arkansas on January 5, 1913. His father died when Kemmons was 9 months old. Shortly thereafter, he and his mother moved to Memphis, Tennessee where Ruby raised Kemmons and taught him to make his way in the world. He credited his mother, whom he installed as a Holiday Inn vice president, with fostering his work ethic. "She taught me that I could do anything that I wanted to do, and she drilled it into my head so hard that I finally decided that I could do anything I wanted to do," he said. His mother's portrait was hung on the wall behind his desk throughout his career. He strived through his attitudes toward work and family to transfer his values and what became known as his "Twenty Tips for Success", cited below, to the workplace and building a business family environment.

**Table 1**

## **Kemmons Wilson's Twenty Tips For Success**

1. Work only a half a day; it makes no difference which half—it can be either the first 12 hours or the last 12 hours.
2. Work is the master key that opens the door to all opportunities.
3. Mental attitude plays a far more important role in a person's success or failure than mental capacity.
4. Remember that we all climb the ladder of success one step at a time.
5. There are two ways to get to the top of an oak tree. One way is to sit on an acorn and wait; the other way is to climb it.
6. Do not be afraid of taking a chance. Remember that a broken watch is exactly right at least twice every 24 hours.
7. The secret of happiness is not in doing what one likes, but in liking what one does.
8. Eliminate from your vocabulary the words, "I don't think I can" and substitute, "I know I can."
9. In evaluating a career, put opportunity ahead of security.
10. Remember that success requires half luck and half brains.
11. A person has to take risks to achieve.
12. People who take pains never to do more than they get paid for, never get paid for anything more than they do.
13. No job is too hard as long as you are smart enough to find someone else to do it for you.
14. Opportunity comes often. It knocks as often as you have an ear trained to hear it, and eye trained to see it, a hand trained to grasp it, and a head trained to use it.
15. You cannot procrastinate—in two days, tomorrow will be yesterday.
16. Sell your wristwatch and buy an alarm clock.
17. A successful person realizes his personal responsibility for self-motivation. He starts himself because he possesses the key to his own ignition switch.
18. Do not worry. You can't change the past, but you sure can ruin the present by worrying over the future. Remember that half the things we worry about never happen, and the other half are going to happen anyway. So, why worry?
19. It is not how much you have but how much you enjoy that makes happiness.
20. Believe in God and obey the Ten Commandments. ([www.kwilson.com](http://www.kwilson.com))

Reviewing Wilson's "Twenty Tips for Success" one can categorize his thoughts to include work ethic, positive attitude, initiative and innovation, risk taking, seeking opportunities and working with people or finding the right partners. These tips characterize who Kemmons Wilson was and what he strove to accomplish.

## **The Story**

In the summer of 1951, Kemmons packed his wife, Dorothy, three sons and two daughters into the family car and set off for Washington, D.C. On the road, he was very disappointed in what he found. The roadside motels charged two dollars extra for each child. "So our \$6 room became a \$16 room". Motels in those days left much to be desired in the way of cleanliness, size and the facilities that they offered ([www.globeandmail.com](http://www.globeandmail.com)). As the story goes Wilson was quoted as saying "Well, I told my wife I didn't think this was fair. It wouldn't encourage people to travel with their children. I told her I was going to build a chain of motels, and I was never going to make a charge for children as long as they stayed in the same room as their parents. I also told her I was going to build a brand name that you could trust. And I told her I'd build 400 of these things across the country before I was through. She laughed at me. That kind of made me peeved, and I said, 'I'm gonna do it!'" Thirty-two years later, Kemmons Wilson who had never read Sinclair Lewis nor ever heard his quote, began at the age of 39 to do just what Lewis had predicted.

Kemmons took notes during their trip, measuring rooms and noticing everything about the places they stayed. By the time he got back to Memphis, he knew what he wanted. He hired a draftsman to draw up the plans. It so happened that the draftsman watched an old Bing Crosby movie while he was working, and he sketched the name of it at the top of his plans. Wilson saw it, liked it, and stuck with it. Holiday Inn was born.

The first Holiday Inn opened on Summer Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee in August of 1952. The business of hospitality had begun.

## Innovator

Kemmons Wilson, not a formally educated man, was able to be innovative and creative, see an idea, make a decision and then find the people he needed to implement that idea and make it a reality. Kemmons Wilson was an individual that through his career provided examples of the concept of “multiple intelligences. Instead of asking the typical question, “How smart is this person?” the question is asked “In what ways is this person smart?” (Dovnan and Iovino, 1997). The different ways of expressing intelligence include linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. From this list those intelligences that perhaps stand out for Kemmons Wilson are the following:

- *Spatial intelligence* is used to perceive and interpret that which we may or may not physically see (Carvin, 2001).
- *Interpersonal intelligence* refers to a person’s ability to effectively interact with other people and understand their feelings and behaviors (Carvin, 2001).
- *Linguistic:* linguistic intelligence is characterized by a capacity to use language effectively through meaningful communication Gardner (1983).
- *Intrapersonal intelligence* refers to a person’s ability to understand the self and strong intrapersonal intelligence is often evidenced by high self-esteem and strength of character that can be used to solve intrapersonal problems (Carvin, 2001).

Wilson’s ability to visualize Holiday Inns from what he had seen and what he wanted to build gave him a spatial understanding of the product. His ability to

attract partners and investors is testament to his interpersonal and perhaps linguistic intelligences. His intrapersonal intelligence is exemplified in his entrepreneurial spirit. These forms of intelligence provide an individual with different avenues for creativity. What comes to mind when we think of creative or creativity? A thesaurus would bring some of the following terms to mind. Being creative or seeing creativity as a skill implies workmanship, proficiency, artistry,



Figure 2. Ribbon cutting by the Wilson children at the first Holiday Inn, Summer Ave., Memphis, Tennessee. (Photo courtesy of the Kemmons Wilson Companies)

inventiveness, composition, decorative, refinement, music, poetic and elegance (Microsoft Thesaurus). Previously discussed in this article were adjectives that describe Kemmons Wilson, there are many similarities with creative descriptors. The traits or characteristics that hoteliers and restaurateurs have or need to have to develop

products, promotional and marketing schemes and establish the atmosphere and décor for their operations are creative endeavors.

Kemmons Wilson established a hotel where millions of guests came to expect free coffee, ice, television and cribs. He built swimming pools and booked musicians to play in the lounge area. By the mid-1960s, the chain was reportedly larger than the Hilton and Sheraton chains combined. *Look* magazine measured Holiday Inn’s success in toilet paper, saying it bought enough to wrap around the equator 10 times. He accomplished many things through, good ideas, energy, a strong work ethic and creativity. Under Wilson’s watch, Holiday and IBM developed Holidex, the industry’s first central reservations system. When he retired following a heart attack in 1979, Holiday Inn had nearly 1,800 hotels in more than 50 countries ([www.kwilson.com](http://www.kwilson.com)).

Kemmons Wilson was a man ahead of his time. Comparably, in today’s knowledge economy, creativity is more important than ever (Amabile, 1998). “He expanded the hospitality industry with innovation,” Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton said, “Kemmons had a zeal for work and his energy level was boundless. Even in his 80s, he was still making business deals ([www.kemmonswilson.com/kw-funeral/Conrad%20Hilton%20College.htm](http://www.kemmonswilson.com/kw-funeral/Conrad%20Hilton%20College.htm)). True creativity and innovation consists of seeing what every one else has seen, thinking what no one else has thought and doing what no else has dared (Creativity, 1997). Creativity often requires imagination and an ability to think outside the box. Everyone is creative to a degree, but some

people seem to have more ability to use their creativity than others (West, 1999). The characteristics of a creative personality are outlined in (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, pp. 58-73). These traits identify creative individuals that have energy but are also quiet and at rest, that are smart and naïve at the same time and people that have a combination of playfulness and discipline or responsibility and irresponsibility as part of their creative characteristics. Additionally, creative individuals alternate between imagination and fantasy and are rooted in a sense of reality. Creative people are also noted by opposite tendencies on the continuum between extroversion and introversion. They are also remarkably humble and proud at the same time. Creative people also tend to escape gender roles and stereotypes. They can be both rebellious and independent and passionate about their work, but also extremely objective. Finally, creative individuals have an openness and sensitivity that often exposes them to suffering pain yet also a great deal of enjoyment. These characteristics while not set in stone can assist to identify creative people and processes. Kemmons Wilson was a creative man and could see a potential deal in anything. He was able to create a new product and make sure that it had the value needed by the public and sell it a fair price. If one lists the creative people in the hospitality industry surely Kemmons Wilson's name will be at the top of the list.

Alexander Graham Bell is quoted as saying, "Sometimes we stare so long at a door that is closing; that we see too late the one that is open" (Quotations, 1999).

Kemmons Wilson was always looking for a deal and always saw that open door. Kemmons was always measuring things and taking notes wherever he traveled. To ensure success Kemmons developed a strategy for creating value. The simple things which people take for granted today, ice machine, kids stay free and others began as value added components of Holiday Inn. While commonplace today, these services were revolutionary at the time and set a precedent for the hotel industry and for every Holiday Inn hotel that would follow.

### Decision Maker

Decision-making, reflective judgment or thought is the end goal of good thinking: the judgment or solution that brings the problem to closure, if only temporarily (King, 1992). Judgments, as part of good thinking, are part of our normal conversational repertoire (Rachlin, 1989). The key for decision makers like Kemmons Wilson was to be aware of the complexity of issues they face and know how their own critical thinking processes work. For example, a decision to be made infers a question and then the synthesis of existing evidence and opinion. At this stage, a person asks questions concerning ill-structured problems, examines evidence, solicits opinions, and analyzes the facts. Theoretically, after considering these data, he or she can choose a "better" answer. Kemmons Wilson always strove for the better answer.

The issue is that the problems to be faced will be ill structured and therefore are not easy to resolve. Psychologists, however, tell us of a universal desire to avoid making decisions whenever possible, and there is abundant evidence that those who are willing to perform this activity and perform it well are among the best paid members of society (Jedamus & Frame, 1969) an apt Wilson description. While we can never be sure that a particular decision will turn out well, we owe it to ourselves to be sure that the method used to make the decision was the best available (Jedamus & Frame, 1969). For example, is the refusal of Mary and Joseph at the Inn in Bethlehem the first lodging example of overbooking or discrimination? There is uncertainty here, but whom can you ask? Religious scholars have theories, but none of them were there. In situations where each fact cannot be determined, evidence emerges as an important ingredient in the construction of knowledge, along with the acknowledgment that the evidence itself cannot be known with

absolute certainty (King, 1992). As the developer of Holiday Inn and a man that lived by his "Twenty Tips for Success" and as a decision maker, Kemmons would have checked Mary and Joseph in.

Kemmons Wilson as a decision maker was a man that had to make important and quick decisions. Kemmons Wilson made many a deal on a handshake and was described by one current company president as a man that could "pull the trigger (make a decision) and get things done." Were all his decisions the correct ones? Obviously not, no one is right all the time. In one famous story Kemmons was asked by a partner, Sam Phillips of Sun Studios, what he should do with a performer's contract? Phillips had been offered \$35,000 for the contract of a young performer and needed the money and asked Kemmons for his input. Kemmons responded that the performer was a nice young man but there was no doubt what he should do. \$35,000 for a performer who is not even a professional, I'd sell the contract! The young performer was Elvis Presley. Throughout his career Kemmons Wilson lived with the fact that he given advice to sell the contract of Elvis Presley. Additionally, every time Elvis (another Memphis legend) saw Kemmons he put his arm around him and said, "Boss, you made a big mistake didn't you and Kemmons replied, "I sure did." (Wilson & Kerr, 1996).

Kemmons was a man that could make a decision and made them with the best information available. The ability to make decisions is the test of a great leader. Decisions require reflective thought for controversial problems where doubt about a correct solution exists

(King, 1992). Individuals must make interpretive arguments and decisions - judgments that entail real consequences for which they must take responsibility and from which they may not flee by disclaiming expertise. They must accomplish all this at amazing rates of speed. The skills of leadership and decision-making and entrepreneurship are intertwined and Kemmons Wilson was clearly one of the leading entrepreneurs of the era. He came from a place where entrepreneurs and innovators were common, Memphis, Tennessee. Clarence Saunders the grocery innovator and founder of Piggly Wiggly, Elvis Presley, the King of Rock n Roll, WC Handy, the Father of the Blues, BB King, blues legend, Fred Smith founder of Federal Express and others all came out of Memphis. Memphis today positions itself as the birthplace of rock 'n roll and home of the blues; innovation and entrepreneurship are in the water.

## Entrepreneur

Most today remember Wilson as a true entrepreneur who thrived on new ideas and never let obstacles get in his way. From the beginning Kemmons Wilson was an entrepreneur. An uncompleted high school education (he received an honorary degree many years later) blended with portions of energy, creativity, innovation, risk taking, drive and spirit proved to be a recipe for success for Kemmons Wilson. He started with no money, a head full of ideas and a desire to be successful. He knew that to be successful he would have to get people to invest in him and his ideas. He greatly valued his reputation and built that reputation on honesty and integrity. That reputa-

tion allowed people to trust him and eventually invest in him thus providing the capital to begin many of his business ventures.

The reputation of a corporation or in this case the man is often cited as an important ingredient in a firm's success (Fombrun 1996; Goldberg and Hartwick 1990). Fombrun (1996) defines corporate reputation as a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that are an aggregate of many personal judgments about the company (Goldsmith, Lafferty & Newell, 2000). Kemmons Wilson was able to build a series of successes that enhanced and spread his reputation as a man with which to do business. For Holiday Inns, that corporate reputation began with was Kemmons Wilson. He transferred his personal values to his business interests and practices and he represented to the public a credibility they would be comfortable with for years. Still today that credibility persists, according to a recent national study of 1,034 adults by Opinion Research Corporation (NASDAQ: ORCI), Holiday Inn was rated Americans' favorite Hotel chain. Holiday Inn was preferred by 18% of respondents. The closest competitor was Marriott at 16%. All other hotels were chosen by fewer than 10% of respondents (Smith Travel Research Newsletter, 2003).

Credibility refers to the extent to which the source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject (Belch and Belch 1994, pp. 189-190). When consumers or potential hotel guests are familiar with a corporation, they have already developed some perceptions about the credibility of that company (Goldsmith, Lafferty & Newell, 2000). Kemmons Wilson personified Holiday Inns and what they stood for throughout their development.

Even before consumers are exposed to advertisements, a company, (Holiday Inn) is seen as "representative of an accumulation of both information and experience acquired over time" and "the process by which attitude toward the advertiser affects attitude toward the ad is likely to be more or less automatic" (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989, p. 53). With the foresight to recognize America's growing dependence on the automobile, Wilson expanded the Holiday Inn brand across the nation along the new U.S. interstate highway system. Wilson also designed the famous Holiday Inn sign using his experience in movie theatres as a guide. "I knew the value of a marquee. I said I want

a sign at least 50 feet tall and have a marquee on it," Mr. Wilson said in 1989. ([www.globeandmail.com](http://www.globeandmail.com), 2003). He erected a sign that told the guests exactly what they could expect and what they would be charged.



**Figure 3. The Young Entrepreneur**  
(Photo courtesy of the Kemmons Wilson Companies)

The familiar green and gold blinking Holiday Inn "Great Sign" soon came to represent comfort, quality, consistency, and value to millions of travelers in the U.S. and around the world, just as it still does today. This is the feeling that Kemmons Wilson as a personality was able to communicate to the public as the Holiday Inn chain grew.

What drives a person like Kemmons Wilson to become an entrepreneur? The driving forces for an individual to become an entrepreneur were identified as several characteristics, which may be seen as the determining psychological factors for entrepreneurship. These are:

- Need for achievement,
- Locus of control: the degree to which an individual thinks they are able to,
- Influence the outcomes of business activities is another determining factor, and

- Risk taking: entrepreneurship means risk taking. (Hornaday and Vesper, 1982)

The decision to become self-employed is likely to occur at various critical junctures in an individual's life course. Kemmons Wilson moved in this direction at an early age in part from necessity. The belief set that sustains an individual through the uncertainties and challenges of forming an entrepreneurial venture is also captured in the term entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) (Singh & DeNoble, 2003). Self-efficacy refers to a person's assessment of his or her capability to accomplish a certain level of performance. Self-efficacy provides a prescriptive formula and process for successful action (Bandura, 1977). Organizational behavior and management researchers have identified several sources of self-efficacy beliefs, such as prior experience, behavior models by significant others, and persuasion or encouragement among others (Bandura, 1986). As Kemmons Wilson's mother had taught him, he believed he could accomplish anything.

Given the complex challenges confronting an entrepreneur, it is clear that one would need to develop a strong will and persistence to overcome the inevitable anxieties that surface during the initial start-up process (DeNoble, Jung, & Ehrlich, 1999; Chen, Greene, & Crick, 1998). An entrepreneur with a high level of confidence in his or her capability to successfully execute the required tasks would have more positive outcomes (i.e., successful venture creation, innovative product offering) than others. Throughout this process, self-efficacy beliefs may help determine

the direction, intensity, and persistence of the entrepreneur's behavior. In the book, *The Entrepreneur*, Hebert and Link, (1982), offer the following typological classification of the 'species' of the entrepreneur:



Figure 4. Kemmons Wilson with his popcorn machine

## Entrepreneurs

### *Kemmons Wilson Actions*

1. The entrepreneur is the person who assumes the risk associated with uncertainty  
*Holiday Inn! And other business start ups*
2. The entrepreneur is the person who supplies financial capital.  
*Partner investment and reinvestment in others*
3. The entrepreneur is an innovator  
*Holidex, "Kids stay free"*
4. The entrepreneur is a decision maker  
*Integration of companies*
5. The entrepreneur is an industrial leader  
*Changed the way hotels did business*
6. The entrepreneur is a manager or superintendent  
*Decision maker*
7. The entrepreneur is an organizer and coordinator of economic resources  
*Attracting Partners*
8. The entrepreneur is the owner of an enterprise

### *Chairman of the Board and its leader (HI)*

9. The entrepreneur is an employer of factors of production  
*Service and value for fair price*
10. The entrepreneur is a contractor  
*Partners*
11. The entrepreneur is an 'arbitrageur'  
*Always buying and selling*
12. The entrepreneur is an allocator of resources among alternative uses.  
*Directing resources to create value*

This profile aptly describes Kemmons Wilson and his accomplishments. He attracted partners, capital, investors and others seeking help to begin their own ventures. When Kemmons Wilson saw an opportunity he took it. As previously discussed in conjunction with his "*Twenty Tips for Success*" these classifications are descriptive of Kemmons Wilson. Highlighting risk, financial capital, innovation, decision-making, leadership, organization ownership, and other traits these descriptors profile a skill set that Kemmons Wilson displayed in his day-to-day routine.

Kemmons's first entrepreneurial venture was selling popcorn and snacks outside a movie theater. He convinced the sales person to sell him a popcorn machine for \$50, with no money down and paid two dollars a week. The venture proved so popular and lucrative, the theater took the concession away from him. This experience gave Wilson a taste for success and heightened his resolve to never let anyone take his business away from him. This short history lesson represents the first in a long line of business and career opportunities in which

Kemmons Wilson engaged. The following list highlights some of his early ventures.

A turning point came when he discovered the profitability of real estate. He became a homebuilder. This move was the beginning of the rethinking of the lodging business as we knew it.

## Partner

"If you died," Kemmons Wilson's wife, Dorothy, once said, "all your partners couldn't get into the funeral (Bernstein 2003)." Few people can do everything alone and Kemmons Wilson knew the value of a good partner. Partnerships and strategic alliances between people, organizations, businesses and government agencies have become more and more essential. A partnership is any agreement between organizations to achieve a common goal (O'Halloran, 1996). A report for Forte Hotels noted a number of reasons for partnership agreements as:

1. Create synergy by joining efforts
2. Pool resources
3. Tackle escalating competition
4. Access new customer and exchange customer data bases
5. Leverage a partner's expertise
6. Meet customer changes in tastes and preferences
7. Add value for customers (Hsu & Sun, 1996)

Wilson recognized that, "in order for him to accomplish his goals and dreams, his partners had to be in a position to make money, too," says Marty Fishman, former president of Seymour N. Logan Associates, which built its first Holiday property in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1959. "The truth of the matter is

**Table 2**

### Kemmons Wilson Career History

- Writing stock prices at a brokerage firm
- Bookkeeper
- Popcorn entrepreneur
- Pimento cheese sandwich sales
- Pinball machines
- Theater owner
- Ice cream store owner
- Cigarette machine concessions
- Wurlitzer Distributorship
- Home Builder
- Army Pilot
- Financier of new projects
- Radio Station owner
- Holiday Inns

that Kemmons Wilson probably made more millionaires than any other single person." ([www.lodgingmagazine.com](http://www.lodgingmagazine.com)). After returning from his Washington trip, he opened his first Holiday Inn in Memphis with the key backing of businessman Wallace E. Johnson, a home builder with a national reputation.

In his autobiography Kemmons Wilson titled chapter eight as "The Absolute Definition of Partnership" and followed with "If Wallace gets to heaven before I do, I'm going to go to the pearly gates and ask St. Peter to give me Wallace as my partner for eternity in heaven"(Wilson & Kerr, 1996). Wallace refers to long time Kemmons Wilson partner (35 years) Wallace Johnson. Johnson was a nationally known builder and an officer of the National Home Builder Association when Kemmons first approached him. Each would be quoted later as saying their biggest piece of luck was being each other's partner.

The third member of the Holiday Inn triumvirate was William Walton. Walton was a successful lawyer when he joined Kemmons and eventually was described by some to be the father franchising. Kemmons continued to grow his partners through franchising and other deals and the list of his partners reads as a who's who of the hospitality industry including John Q. Hammons, Roy Weingardner and others. Mark van Hartesvelt, Principal Gemstone Resorts, said, "What a great brand he built, and it is truly amazing how many people he

turned into successful business people," said Hartesvelt. "He really was an entrepreneurial genius and attracted some of the pillars of the industry" (Hausman, 2003). Laurence Geller, CEO of Strategic Hotel Capital, who worked with Holiday Inn in the late 1970s as its head of international development and later on ran the company's domestic development operations noted that many of the industry's top players earned their stripes with Wilson. Names such as Steve Bollenbach, Chuck Ledsinger, Mike Leven, Tom Keltner and a host of others all benefited from Wilson's tutelage (Hausman, 2003). Over the years Kemmons partnered with and or bought and developed many companies. He worked to integrate the businesses that supplied Holiday Inns. Pictured below is a collage of the companies in the Kemmons Wilson connection.

## Brand Maker

Brands, which are highly successful, have the ability to become synonymous in the consumer's mind with the potential of answering his or her particular needs or wants, forming strong consumer bonds (Tillotson, 2002). As a result, the answer to a consumer's thirst becomes a desire for a Coke or a Pepsi; an afternoon's momentary hunger a Hershey candy bar or a bag of Frito-Lay chips; the desire for a healthy hunger-satisfaction breakfast becomes a bowl of Total cereal; or the young woman's desire to avoid future "widow's hump" becomes a daily glass of Tropicana calcium-fortified orange juice (Tillotson, 2002). The desire Kemmons Wilson created was for a clean, consistent lodging brand people can trust and afford.



Figure 5, Collage of Kemmons Wilson Companies

At the foundation of the concept of brand image is an understanding of the attributes and functional consequences, and the symbolic meanings, consumers associate with a product. Hence, for services, we can state that service brand image includes the attributes and functional consequences and the symbolic meanings consumers associate with a specific service. Such meanings are attached to a service through a combination of personal experience, communication with other people, and advertising (Padgett & Allen, 1997). In sum, service brand image is the consumer's mental picture of the brand created in response to brand-related stimuli (Padgett & Allen, 1997). In the Holiday Inn scenario service brand image translated to the Great Sign and Kemmons Wilson the man.

Service brand image is by definition a consumer-oriented concept, stressing the consumer's active role in creating meaning in response to marketing stimuli and what the marketing stimuli represent (Padgett & Allen, 1997). Attributes and building service brand image requires an understanding of how customers make sense of services, or create and attach self-relevant meanings to services (Padgett & Allen, 1997). Kemmons Wilson understood what his customers wanted and made his early decisions based on his dissatisfaction with the lodging options available to families.

The issue for Kemmons Wilson was to create a brand and market that brand to a mid-income segment. He marketed to the moderate-income traveler. "You can cater to rich people, and I'll take the rest," he said. "The good Lord made so many more of them." Kemmons Wilson created a cataclysmic event, the creation of Holiday Inns that changed the lodging industry forever. To create a niche for Holiday Inn, Kemmons Wilson had to achieve sufficient size and purchasing power to be profitable, have growth potential and reach a market bypassed or neglected by major competitors (Kotler, 1980). One key to his success was exemplified in the ABCD Rule of successful niche marketing, Always Be Collecting Data (Linneman and Stanton, 1993).

Increasingly, successful companies do not just add value they reinvent it, where all levels of the product chain co-produce value (Normann & Ramirez 1993). The goal has become not to create value for customers, but to mobilize customers to create value from the company's various offerings. Jerry Daly, President of Daly Gray, a hotel industry public relations firm was once VP of PR for Holiday Inn. Though he started his tenure a couple of weeks after Wilson retired, his presence continued to reverberate at the home office. He reflected about how Holiday Inn once owned more than 100 companies, each servicing some aspect of the hotel chain from printing companies that made the hotel guides to suppliers that equipped the hotels. "His favorite statement that I heard him say over and over was that 'Becoming successful was easy. All I did was ask our people to work half a day, I don't care which, the first half or the second half,'" Daly said. "He was the creative force for the company. Kemmons was out there like a stallion charging in 50 different directions and was always willing to take on new thoughts and ideas" (Hausman, 2003). To effectively do this, a company needs to have its most attractive offerings involve customers, suppliers and business partners (Normann & Ramirez, 1993). Kemmons Wilson and his efforts exemplified this theory. Kemmons realized that the only way to gain competitive advantage is to conceive a value creating system (Normann and Ramirez, 1991). He created partnerships and bought companies in his supply chain and was an innovator of business integration. This network or system would require Holiday Inn to classify their market position, identify resource linkages, look for additional niche markets, set priorities, build a hierarchy of networks and finally, make it work. Creating Holiday Inn put Kemmons Wilson ahead of the curve in hospitality business innovation.



Figure 6. The First Holiday Inn  
(Photo courtesy of the Kemmons Wilson Companies)

Today, corporations or firms are brands in their own right (Kitchen & Shultz, 2001). The brand is increasingly the central core or hub of what consumers want, need, and consider being value (see Schultz, 1998). And, consumers have ongoing relationships with brands (Kitchen & Shultz, 2001). The corporate brand (Holiday Inns) needed to become the central meaning that provides the basis for identity programs, strategy and competitive thrust to the basketful of individual brands within its portfolio. Each brand type associates with different stakeholders. Meanwhile, individual brands (Kemmons Wilson), powerful corporate assets in their own right, promote exchanges that build brand loyalty, provide brand equity, and immeasurably enhance and empower corporations that ostensibly "own" those (Kitchen & Shultz, 2001). A strategy of communication has to be developed, underpinned by a sound ongoing analysis of consumer behaviors, in terms of returns on investment by behavioral segment is needed (Kitchen & Shultz, 2001). The purposes of corporate branding have been illustrated adapted below to indicate what a corporate brand is and what it can potentially accomplish:

- make the company name known, distinct, and credible in the minds of existent and potential customers, consumers, and stakeholders
- facilitate the building of relationships with existing and potential customers, consumers, and stakeholders
- portray, if possible, the benefits offered to potential guests and stakeholders that embody the value system of the corpora-

tion (de Chernatony and McDonald (1998) Kitchen & Shultz, 2001).

Corporate brand value comes from four things: (1) Quality that is maintained throughout the firm. Kemmons was insistent that his franchisees provide guest a quality experience for a fair price. (2) Power, which means the authority and capability that the firm is able to generate through internal and external resources such as R&D, manufacturing capability and so on. As the Holiday Inn brand grew so did the influence of the company and its ability to gain economies of scale. (3) Price, which means the value they deliver to stakeholders in all areas. Prices associated with quality, is the fair price for a family to travel as Kemmons Wilson saw it. (4) Loyalty, that is how much support and advocacy the firm has been able to develop over time in the marketplace from customers, employees, channels, and so on (Kitchen & Shultz, 2001). Holiday Inn grew in part because it provided a service that had not previously been provided. The benefits for all Holiday Inn stakeholders were widely known and made Wilson and Holiday Inn a person and company of choice with which to conduct business.

### Going Global

Brands associated with high quality make the most inroads among consumers around the world, according to a paper published in the *Journal of International Business Studies* in January 2003, "How Perceived Brand Globalness Creates Brand Value" presents research that measured how a brand's perception as "global" affects customers' inclination to buy. "If a brand is perceived to be global, that creates value in the mind of consumers. Most of the value creation is through the fact that consumers ascribe products that are global to be of good quality (Yu, 2003)". Wilson realized the value of the chain's guarantee, name and 1950s-esque roadside signs, which he called the "Great Sign." Wilson tried to register all with the U.S. patent bureau and was turned down several times because the bureau had no precedent for protecting such intangibles.

Laurence S. Geller stated, "This guy was charismatic, energetic and vital. He was a brilliant entrepreneur and his mind never stopped looking for ideas. Kemmons envisioned a hotel with a name travelers could trust—a place that consistently provided full-service amenities and didn't charge extra for children. That vision became a reality with the opening of the first Holiday Inn hotel on August 1, 1952. On that day, an American icon was born (IGHotels.com-



Figure 7. Bigger Than Life: Kemmons Wilson and the Great Sign  
(Photo courtesy of the Kemmons Wilson Companies)

kemmons%20dies). The 400th Holiday Inn was built in December of 1962. Dorothy, Kemmons Wife was still laughing, but for different reasons now (Dries, 2003).

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At InterContinental Hotels Group, the parent company for Holiday Inn, Stevan Porter, President, The Americas, said in a statement, "Kemmons Wilson is the sole reason the Holiday Inn brand exists today. He set the standard for the modern lodging industry, and his

vision and foresight will forever be remembered. He truly embodied the American entrepreneurial spirit”(www.HotelMotel.com).

## Summary

Mr. Wilson was a folksy, dynamic and humble workaholic who answered his own phone, rarely traveled with an image-shaping entourage and could be found doing landscaping work around his hotels. He routinely put in 12-hour days and ran business ventures nationwide, including shopping centers, oil refineries and catfish and bullfrog farms (Bernstein, 2003). The focus of his career was Holiday Inn, which took off with the postwar baby boom and the interstate highway system and now has more than 1,500 hotels worldwide. The chain triggered scores of imitators such as Howard Johnson, Motel 6 and Econolodge (Bernstein, 2003).

Wilson was the antithesis of the overly cautious corporate CEO who relies on voluminous marketing studies and focus groups. He rarely traveled with a spokesman or public relations person to arrange interviews. Wilson himself often answered a telephone call to his office. He rarely had messages delivered; he would come himself. The folksy advice masked an innovative mind and unique personality. Holiday Inns was the best known of numerous business ideas Wilson developed (Bernstein, 2003).

In the Wilson family message read at Kemmons Wilson’s funeral on February 15, 2003 they noted that “Dad was definitely “old school” you worked hard, your word was your bond, you trusted people, you did the right things no matter what the consequences and you were impeccably fair and honorable to all. He had a restless intellectual curiosity



Figure 8. Ground Breaking, Nathan Road, Hong Kong

about everything...he never stopped learning. He could see hidden opportunity in every setback. His persistence and tenacity were hallmarks of his life. He truly believed that his success was “*Half Luck & Half Brains*” the title of his book. He met Presidents, Popes, Kings, Queens, Princesses, Emperors, captains of industry, Hollywood stars, pro athletes... but it never changed him. He was as “genuine” as they come. He was a modern day legend and icon, but he always identified himself with the common man and was always ready to give you a helping hand if you needed it. He was unique: he had his own eccentricities. He was a person that loved to buy ground, as he called it, ground not land (kw-funeral/family message).

John Q. Hammons, Chairman and CEO of John Q. Hammons Hotels started franchising Holiday Inns back in 1958 and said over the years he and Kemmons became great friends, staying in contact until the end. He was the real pioneer of hotel franchising, and he was a great leader, a great thinker and never met a deal he didn’t want to look at. He was not a gambler, but he would take chances so it would appear that way,” Hammons said (Hausman, 2003).

“He was a bigger than life character,” said Mike Leven, Chairman & CEO of U.S. Franchise Systems, and a former CEO of the Holiday Inn system. “He was a phe-



Figure 9. Kyoto grand opening

nomenal guy and he wore his heart on his sleeve. He was a true American hero story. His impact on the hotel industry is absolutely beyond imagination. Leven noted that it didn’t matter where life took him; Wilson would get together with his entire family—wife, children and grandkids—every Sunday for dinner. “No matter how much he ran and however busy he was, he never lost site of the major purpose in life.” (Hausman, 2003)

Ambitious yet humble, wise despite having never graduated high school, Wilson took a concept born of the frustrations he experienced on a family vacation and transformed it into a lodging brand recognized the world over. Along the way Holiday Inn established industry benchmarks for virtually everything from room size to central reservations (Lodging Magazine.com) Representatives of the International Association of Holiday Inns said of his passing, the Holiday Inn® family lost our founder and friend, Kemmons Wilson. Others commented that his legacy leaves the world a kinder, more hospitable place and thank you for giving America—and the world—a home away from home. Kemmons Wilson wrote in 1972, when he was still chairman of the board of the company that billed itself as “the nation’s innkeeper,” that “The Holiday Inn story is larger than buildings and happy vacations,” “It is the story of people—people who had faith in an idea and who were willing to work together for its development.”

After departing Holiday Inns, Wilson didn’t stay idle. He established Wilson World Hotels, developing a small brand catering to business travelers, became involved with numerous charities, and published an autobiography, *Half*

Luck and Half Brains: The Kemmons Wilson Holiday Inn Story, in 1996. He donated the \$15 million required to build the hospitality and resort management school at the University of Memphis, which, fittingly, has at its core an 82-room Holiday Inn. At the dedication ceremony, he quipped that the school represented his "final deal." (www.kwilson.com).

Included below are a chronology of important events and significant dates and majors awards given to Kemmons Wilson.

### His Final Deal

When the \$15-million hotel and hospitality school Wilson had built on the University of Memphis campus opened in April, Wilson announced, "This is my final deal." In August of 2002 the Kemmons Wilson School (KWS) of Hospitality and Resort Management opened its doors. The question is "What is the Kemmons Wilson education brand?"

Adjectives describing Kemmons Wilson are the skills and attributes that the KWS will use to build our niche in hospitality business education. Descriptors and adjectives that have been noted and discussed in this profile, when thinking of Kemmons Wilson include entrepreneur, innovator, partner, energetic, adaptive, visionary, business minded, price-value, creative, real estate developer, builder, franchising pioneer, branding, deal maker, partner and negotiator to name a few. The effort in the hospitality business education process at the University of Memphis is not to make everyone an brand maker, entrepreneur, franchisor or developer but to take these skills and translate them into a curriculum that provides learning opportunities for students and model for our students that these skills and abilities are

**Table 3**

### Kemmons Wilson - Significant Dates

- Date of Birth - January 5, 1913
- First job - 1919 - 6 years old - sold magazines door-to-door
- First business venture - 1930 - Popcorn machine in front of Memphian Theater
- Went on to own the DeSoto Theater and later built Airways Theater
- First house built - 1933 - paid \$1,000 for lot and \$1,700 for the house
- Built on wrong lot - swapped deeds with owner of lot
- Borrowed \$6,500 on the house to buy Wurlitzer distributorship. Soon won \$10,000 prize as top salesman.
- Raymond Williams - general superintendent for home building. He and Kemmons built hundreds of houses together.
- Kemmons bought lumberyard so he could purchase all the materials wholesale.
- December 2, 1941 - Married Dorothy Lee
- 1941 - 1945 - became flight officer in the U.S. Transport Command - flew the "Hump", China-India-Burma
- 1947 - built family house on Galloway Dr. (Red Acres Subdivision) - built on wrong lot - - again.
- 1951 - vacation trip to Washington that inspired standardized lodging.
- 1952 - opened first Holiday Inn at 4941 Summer Ave.
- 1955 - becomes president of Memphis Area Home Builders Association
- 1979 - retires as chairman of the board of Holiday Inns following heart surgery.
- 1981 - purchased 357 acres of land just four miles from Disney World
- 1982 - opened Orange Lake Resort & Country Club - now the country's largest single-site timeshare operation.
- 1983 - built and opened first Wilson World Hotel & Suites just one mile from Disney World
- 1999 - announced largest gift of its kind to the University of Memphis - to build the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management.
- 2002 - Opening of KW School of Hospitality and Resort Management.
- 2003- February 12, C. Kemmons Wilson passed away.

transferable to any setting. The theory is that no matter what segment our students enter these skills will be useful and important to their success. If we integrate these skills and technical hospitality business skills into the curriculum we will help a student's natural skills in these areas develop and mature. The essence of a Kemmons Wilson School education is embodied in the University of Memphis positioning statement:

"Dreamers, Thinkers, Doers." This statement embodies who we are, what our faculty is known for being, who our graduates become (www.memphis.edu). A Kemmons Wilson brand framework follows and highlights the challenges and issues and direction for the Kem-

**Table 4**

### **Kemmons Wilson Major Awards**

- Hall of Fame 1961 *American Motel Magazine*
- Hall of Fame 1961 *Hospitality Magazine*
- Golden Plate Award 1965 American Academy of Achievement
- National Image Award 1966 Real estate Board of Memphis
- Master of Free Enterprise Achievement award 1968-Jr. Achievement
- One of 1000 Makers of the Twentieth Century 1969 London Sunday Times
- Horatio Alger Award 1970 Horatio Alger Association
- Businessman of the Year Award 1970 Religious Heritage of America
- National Human relations award 1972 National Conference of Christian and Jews
- Hall of Fame 1975 American Society of Travel Agents
- National Business Hall of Fame 1982 Fortune Magazine - Jr. Achievement
- Entrepreneur award 1982 International Franchise Association
- Memphis Business Hall of Fame 1984 Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce
- International Achievement award 1984 World Trade Club/San Francisco
- International executive of the Year 1985 Sales & Marketing Executive International
- Outstanding Business Leader Award 1985 Northwood Institute
- Hall of Fame 1989 International franchise Association
- Outstanding Citizen Award 1992 Civitan International
- Hall of Leaders 1991 Travel Industry of America
- Cooke Halle Award 1991 Carnival Memphis
- Entrepreneurial Hall of Honor 1992 Pink Palace Museum

mons Wilson School of Hospitality & Resort Management as a legacy to Kemmons Wilson. Similar to the processes and history described in this article the framework attempts to capture the challenge in a competitive market tied to a legacy that includes creating value, innovation, price and quality, innovation and creativity and working with partners and stakeholders to make Kemmons Wilson an educational brand.

In a quote the year before his passing Kemmons Wilson said of education "For many years I have operated by my "Twenty Tips For Success." The education industry and its teachers like business and its managers must always strive for success. The success of a hospitality school and its teachers will be measured by the success of its graduates. To be successful students must be provided unique learning opportunities. I have often said, "Work only a half a day; it makes no difference which half - it can be either the first 12 hours or the last 12 hours." Students and faculty know that education and hard work are the master keys that open the door to all opportunities. I never graduated from high school but I have made a commitment to education, our industry and its future. Remember that success requires half luck and half brains and a commitment to the principles of customer service, quality, and value" (O'Halloran & Deale, 2003).

A Kemmons Wilson School graduate's ability to showcase their operational knowledge and experience highlighted by their skills associated with innovation, creativity, vision and adaptability and professionalism will exemplify the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospital-

ity and Resort Management Brand!

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Figure 11

## Framework for Kemmons Wilson Brand Education

### Challenge

Creating Kemmons Wilson School Products that reflect the KWS brand.  
Develop distribution channels and promotional opportunities.

#### Creating Value

- Products
- Undergraduate Education
- Prepared Graduates
- Continuing Education Programs
- Professional Partnership

Message: Education where the business of hospitality began!

#### Target Market(s)

- Memphis, Mid-South Region
- Tennessee, Southeast
- National and International
- Potential students and
- Professional recruiters and
- Other partners. International markets explored

#### Brand Distribution

New venues for consumer Purchase, online education, websites, on-campus education

#### Marketing Strategy for KWS Where Ideas Grow Stronger!

##### Opportunities to Create Value:

- New Program
- Kemmons Wilson is an icon in the lodging and hospitality industry
- Stress value and price.
- Create alternative programs and opportunities to partner.
- Regional hospitality business programs supply is low.
- Partnerships
- Technology synergy with FedEx Technology Institute.

##### Pillars of the KWS Brand

Entrepreneurship, innovation, partner building, energy, adaptive, visionary, business minded, create value, creative ideas, real estate developer, construction franchising pioneer, branding, deal maker partner and negotiator

##### Added Value by Marketing

- Brand Image: KWS
- Trade Shows
- Newsletter
- Association membership
- Printed materials, website

#### Designing the Offer

- Undergraduate Education
- Hospitality Business Education
- Continuing Education
- Graduate courses
- Leadership
- Decision making
- Career Opportunities

#### Price

Price/value/quality relationship a bargain in education.

Private school education or a public school price.

#### Competition

Regional and national competitors

#### Budgets

State funds and private support, research

(Adapted from Moore & Pessemier, 1993 and Linneman & Stanton, 1991)

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**Figure 10. The Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality & Resort Management**  
(Photo courtesy of the University of Memphis)

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