

J. W. Marriott, Jr.: The Spirit to Serve

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The “Marriott Way” is built on fundamental ideals of service to associates, customers, and community. These ideals serve as the cornerstone for all Marriott associates who pledge to fulfill “The Spirit to Serve”. <<http://marriott.com/corporateinfo/culture/coreValues.mi> accessed October 29, 2004>

If you enter the name “J.W. Marriott” into Google you will be presented with over 501,000 “hits”. No one article can claim to capture the essence and spirit of the man who is an icon among icons in the hospitality industry. At best, the hope is to provide readers and in particular aspiring hospitality professionals, with a few insights about this man’s life and leadership and his concern for those with whom he works, and highlight just a few of his many accomplishments in the hospitality business. In the end you will have a better understanding of the man after whom you should model your attitude and behavior in your quest for a “Spirit to Serve”. At the conclusion of this article are a few personal communications from individuals

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Authors’ note: Additional material for this article was derived from personal conversations with current and former Marriott International professionals.

who have worked directly with Mr. J. W. “Bill” Marriott, Jr. confirming much of what has been written about his “hands-on” management style and the service culture he fostered at Marriott International.

The Man - Personal

“I don’t always get the suite. I don’t need a suite usually. I just like a nice, quiet room away from the elevators” (Frey, 20003).

J.W. Marriott, Jr. speaking in an interview with the Seattle Post-Intelligencer Reporter described his room preferences when traveling round the world checking on the cleanliness of rooms, the courtesy of Marriott associates and satisfaction of his guests. Were his guests getting the same thing that he wanted after a long day on the road, “a nice quiet room away from the elevators” (<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC> accessed on October 29, 2004)? It is that extraordinary attention to detail and doing what it takes to satisfy the customer that he, and his father before him, infused into the Marriott culture that accounts for Marriott International’s premier position in the hospitality industry.

J.W. Marriott Jr. prefers to be called Bill. Perhaps it is because he also calls those who work for him by their first names. He is one of those people who can remember your name, and your wife’s name, your kids and your birthday. “That’s his style” says Gil Grosvenor, long time friend, and Chairman of the National Geographic Society (McCalla, 2002). Bill was born in Washington DC on March 25, 1932. His father, J.W. Marriott, Sr. started the business from a small root beer stand and it grew to encompass the ownership of hotels, cruise ships, theme parks, and airline flight kitchens. Today, Marriott International, Inc. is among the best-managed firms in the country. Bill Marriott, Jr. is a stickler for detail and he takes the hands-on approach to management. In a recent interview he stated, “You have a hard time managing a business sitting in an office” (Frey 2003, p1). Perhaps he is that way because it is how his parents raised him. “My father couldn’t stand to see me idle. He always had a list of things that he needed done, even chopping wood” (The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives, 2004). Bill still lives by a list of things to do. His exacting attention to detail and uncompromising efforts toward standardization

in order to provide a quality guest experience has lead to numerous list, not the least of which are the 66 steps for cleaning rooms at Marriott properties (Girard, 1991).

Bill Marriott and his wife Donna have four children. They enjoy spending time as a family going to movies or to one of the company’s Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlors. Like Bill, who rotated through all the job stations at the HOT SHOPPE restaurants started by his father, the Marriott children work summers at Marriott operations. He is an acknowledged workaholic. He neither smokes nor drinks and is a devout follower of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. “My church is at the core of my belief system. There’s a central learning I have from growing up in our church that I cite as an example of those beliefs. It’s what a former church president described as ‘deciding to decide.’ What that means to me is, decide to live a good life and stay with that decision” (President & CEO Magazine, 2004). Despite his busy schedule, he devotes several hours each week as a counselor. Every Marriott hotel room contains the Book of Mormon alongside the Gideon Bible. He acknowledges that at times his community work may be contrary to his short-term business interest but he believes the benefit of long-term social gain to be paramount. Bill Marriott works to promote high moral values for America’s youth. He is involved through his work with the Boy Scout Explorers and in anti-drinking campaigns aimed at teenagers (<http://galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC> accessed on October

29, 2004). He is proactive in sponsoring programs dedicated to improving the quality of education, including the Marriott Hospitality High School, the first public charter high school dedicated to and supported by the hospitality industry (McCalla, 2002). He has avoided getting involved in the casino gambling industry and nightclub operations that many other large hotel chains have entered. The ethic of hard work and clean living is a source of pride for Marriott, "This is a business where it is very easy to get in trouble with all the bars and nightclub operations" (<http://galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC> accessed on October 29, 2004).

Mr. Marriott is not concerned with the wealth that accompanies being the leader of a giant organization. He dresses for simplicity and shuns designer labels. He drives himself to work and usually flies coach when he's called away on a business trip. His attention to cost control and economy does not mean that the quality and comfort of his guests and their satisfaction are compromised. On a visit to one hotel, he remarked to employees, whom he insists be referred to as "associates" that, "There are not enough lights out front. Somebody is trying to skimp" (Girard, 1991). The key to success, Marriott maintains, is controlling expenses while keeping the company's name and reputation solid. "This is a penny business," Marriott said in *Duns Business Monthly*, "We hold no patents; all we have is our name, so we watch our expenses" (Biography Resource Center, 2004).

Watching expenses involves yet another list, of exacting detail for some 60,000 recipes for food portions and preparation. While it would be impossible for Marriott to keep constant watch over all of the com-

pany hotels and resorts, and popular priced restaurants, he does an impressive round-the-clock job of actually keeping in touch with the needs of both his guests and his associates.

Who Is This Leader?

"Take care of your employees and they'll take care of your customers," J.W. Marriott, Sr. stated (<http://marriott.com/corporateinfo/culture/heritageJWillardMarriott.mi> accessed October 30, 2004).

According to Bill Marriott, keeping costs low alone will not protect the Marriott name. He is in the people business, he says, and it's how his associates interact with his guests that determines the Marriott difference. Bill is keenly aware that customers know that value transcends price. The guest room may be the product, but the associates' caring attitude is Marriott's real value. That value cannot be measured with statistics and can't be manufactured. It can only be delivered by attracting, retaining, and inspiring the best people with "The Spirit to Serve". In order to do that, employees, or associates as Bill likes to call them, must also be provided value beyond simple monetary compensation.

In a speech to the Economic Club of Detroit on October 2, 2000, titled, "Our Competitive Strength: Human Capital," Bill Marriott shared five guiding principles derived from the simple model created by his father over 70 years ago that stated, "Take care of your employees and they'll take care of your customers."

1. Get it right the first time.

We'd rather hire a person with the spirit to serve and train them to work in a hotel, then take on someone who knows the hospitality business and try teaching them to enjoy serving a guest. It's very hard to teach people to smile. That's why we hire friendly associates and train technical skills.

2. Money is a big thing, but it's not the only thing.

What's true for keeping customers is just as true for keeping employees. Money is one component of value; however, Marriott not only offers competitive compensation to employees, but also a great workplace that includes intangible factors like work life balance, quality leadership, opportunity for advancement, a healthy and safe work environment and training. These factors outweigh money in an associates' decision to stay or leave. According to Bill, the longer an associate is with Marriott, pay matters less and these intangible factors matter more. The Marri-

ott value proposition is more than retaining associates; it is about the value that they create for the customer.

3. A caring workplace is a bottom-line issue.

When a guest arrives at a Marriott hotel, the odds are good that the arriving guest has been 'beaten up' by the airlines, is tired, lonely, and wants to get some rest. Any hotel can offer a weary traveler a bed. Marriott's value proposition is genuine care, dependability, and a sense of community. Associate commitment is one of the key elements of creating value for Marriott customers. Bill proposes that delivering value to his associates is a key factor in the equation of guest satisfaction. Associates come to work and there's no knowing what problems they may face at home. They can come to work and feel safe, secure, and welcomed. It's not just about retaining associates; it's how a friendly and caring workplace environment translates to the bottom-line. Bill's father would sit on the couch in the lobby of their first hotels and help associates with personal challenges by talking them through one problem at a time.

Today Marriott, like most large companies, is too widespread to solve everyone's problems on the lobby couch. Bill Marriott's philosophy is that companies today must design a caring workplace. One way to do that is by making a manager accountable for associate satisfaction and for turnover rates. Every day, the associates in their full service hotels participate in 15 minute meetings in each department. A key part

of those meetings is reviewing one of the 20 basics of the day; such as Basic #1: "We practice teamwork and treat each other with the same respect we afford our family and our best guests." Each associate is given the opportunity to raise personal concerns. Associates' birthdays and anniversaries are celebrated. "We build loyalty among our associates and in turn that (loyalty) translates to repeat business among our customers" (Bill Marriott's Economic Club October 2, 2000 speech). The end result is everyone feels they have a stake in making the hotel a success.

4. Promote from within.

"Culture is the life-thread and glue that links our past, present, and future" (<http://marriott.com/corporateinfo/culture/coreCulture.mi> accessed October 28, 2004).

Elevating veterans to positions of leadership helps pass on the soul of the business to others. Just as his father passed the Marriott ethic to Bill, the Marriott corporate culture is passed from one generation of managers to the next by the policy of promoting from within. Over 50 percent of Marriott managers have been promoted in this manner.

5. Build your brand for your Associates.

For most companies, branding is the antidote to the commoditization tidal wave that would otherwise level the value proposition and leave a company competing only on the basis of price. If branding enables the company to make the sale to a consumer who has unlimited choices, then why not use branding to make the sale to potential employees who also have unlimited choices. Marriott brands employment, as well as products, communicating the promise of a great work experience to their associates.

Echoing his speech, in an interview with *President and CEO Magazine*, Bill Marriott is quoted as saying, "'People first' has been the foundation of Marriott's culture and success for over 75 years. We have a leadership team that is completely tuned in to the diverse world in which we operate. I believe our culture is one of our most important competitive advantages. It influences the way we treat associates, customers, and the community and impacts all our successes. There are some great, successful companies in the marketplace, and I think you'll find that behind them is a strong culture" (<http://www.pceo.us/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=61> accessed October 28, 2004).

Epilogue: In the 2002 American Traveler Survey, Marriott and Residence Inn were ranked #1 by business travelers for customer satisfaction (<http://www.marriott.com> accessed October 28, 2004).

The Businessman

Bill Marriott's father gave him two pieces of advice, "Don't go into debt, and don't go into the hotel business." Bill didn't listen to either (Girard, 1991).

J.W. Marriott, Sr. was born on a sheep ranch in Ogden, Utah. A devout member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, he did missionary work in New York City and Washington DC. In the spring of 1927 he moved to Washington, DC and on May 10, 1927 opened up an A&W Root Beer stand named the Hot Shoppe (Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives, 1998).

For 25 years Marriott, Sr. scrupulously avoided putting the company in debt while he opened up 45 restaurants in nine states. In 1950 the company needed cash to expand. J.W. Marriott went to the equity markets and issued 229,880 shares of stock (about a third of the Company) at \$10.88 a share. A \$2,000 investment in 1953 would be worth well over \$1 million today. In 1956, largely at the urging of his son Bill, the company moved into the hotel segment. The Twin Bridges Marriott, managed by Bill Marriott, was the company's first hotel. It opened at the foot of the 14th St. Bridge in Virginia. By the time Marriott, Sr. turned the company over to Bill in 1964, he had built 120 Hot Shoppe restaurants, a dozen hotels, and had an \$85 million-a-year business, all the while keeping the company virtually free of debt. In ensuing years, J.W. Marriott would

often tell the same joke, "When I came to Washington in 1927, I owed \$2,000, now I owe \$20 million. Is that progress" (Girard 1999, <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC> accessed on October 29, 2004)?

Bill Marriott's vision for the company is that Marriott International be the world's leading provider of hospitality services. He is known for having a hands-on management style. His "Spirit to Serve" culture is based on a business philosophy started 76 years ago by his parents.

In the 1950s while Bill Marriott was at the University of Utah, he spent weekends watching California grand prix racing and developed a passion for fast cars. His passion for speed translated into pushing performance when it came to Marriott International. Upon taking over the company in 1964, he listed as one of his primary goals to grow the company as fast as possible and to set an extraordinary growth rate of 20 percent annually as the minimum acceptable target.

Most CEOs in the hotel industry are dealmakers, but Bill Marriott is and always has been an operations man. "I don't do deals, when you talk about the hours of negotiation involved and then working with attorneys and flying all over the place, meeting with banks, I mean that's not my bag" (Girard 1991). He would often arrive at a property under construction and begin to order changes, things like wallpaper and kitchen design, even though sometimes the suggestions resulted in cost overruns. Like his father, who traveled the world checking on the courtesy of staff and the cleanliness of hotels, Bill was ever vigilant over operations and always strived to maintain exacting standardization. He was

well aware that his name was on every building. It is said that once, while riding in a car over the 14th St. Bridge, he happened to glance up at the Twin Bridges sign and saw the lights of the second letter in the Marriott sign were out. He called the hotel and instructed that the light be fixed immediately (Girard, 1991). He was never too busy to stop and pick up a gum wrapper off a hotel floor and he expected his managers to do the same. He expects the general manager of a hotel to inspect rooms just as he inspects the rooms himself when he visits. "He's fussy that way. It's his version of management by walking around except in his case it's more like management by running around" (McCalla, 2002). He visits as many as 250 of his nearly 3,000 hotels every year, racking up over 150,000 air miles annually. When asked why, he says, "I like to see the people. I like to find out what's going. You got to get out and talk to the people, find out what's going on at the hotels and the kind of service we provide to the guests" (Frey, 2003).

Operations, however critical to the system, was just one of the engines of Marriott growth. Bill knows the simple payback of a hotel is 10 to 15 years. He understands you can't grow 20 percent annually if you take that long to get your money back. So, in the 1970s, Bill wholeheartedly embraced the strategy of selling hotels to investors so that the company could recoup cash out of a project almost immediately, thus erasing the debt from its books and build more hotels. The company could also earn healthy fees and a cut of the profits by signing long-term management agreements with the new owners. While the Marriott Company was not the first to embrace this strategy, it became the most accomplished at it.

By 1982, Bill was unique in the industry. No chain in the world could match the degree of vertical integration that could be found in Marriott's development program. His company would identify their own sites, develop and construct the properties, and then sell them off. This process allowed Marriott International to continue to grow at the breakneck pace he originally proposed in 1964. Through it all, Bill personally approved every deal and reviewed the plans for every property.

In 1983, Bill Marriott introduced a new concept to the hotel industry, the Marriott Courtyard. It was to do for Marriott what the Model T did for Ford. This was a hotel designed from the ground-up to be mass-produced. The property was specifically designed to permit Marriott to rapidly enter the mid-price hotel market. The concept enabled Marriott to successfully exploit a new market that was vast and virtually untapped, at a time when the full-service hotel market had reached a saturation point.

Using the Courtyard concept, instead of building a dozen or so hotels each year, a mass-produced hotel was built and operated to exacting standards; it could result in 50 to 100 new hotels each year and enable the company to continue growing rapidly. In 2003, Marriott opened its 500th Courtyard in downtown Minneapolis (www.marriott.com accessed October 28, 2004).

During the 1990s, despite a slow down in the economy in the early part of that decade, under the stewardship of Bill Marriott, the company continued to prosper. In 1993, the Company split into Marriott International and Host Marriott Corporation. In 1995 and 1997, Marriott International acquired the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, LLC, and the Renaissance Hotel Group, respectively. It introduced the Towne Place Suites, Fairfield Suites and Marriott Executive Residence brands. In the latter part of the decade, it acquired the ExecuStay Corporate housing company. Ever conscious of the company's commitment to social responsibility, Bill Marriott established "Pathways to Independence," Marriott's Welfare to Work program (www.marriott.com accessed October 28, 2004). By the end of the decade, Bill Marriott had positioned his company as a major force for the twenty-first century in every competitive market segment of the lodging industry.

Today Marriott International employs approximately 128,000 people, and operates nearly 2,600 lodging properties in the United States (http://marriott.com/careers/default.mi?WT_Ref=mi_left accessed October 29, 2004) and 63 other countries and territories, managing

over 490,464 rooms. Marriott revenues totaled \$19 billion in 2003 and \$476 million in gross profits (http://marriott.com/corporateinfo/culture/heritageTimeline.mi accessed October 29, 2004). Marriott Rewards, their frequent guest program has over 20,000,000 members.

Major brands of businesses include: JW Marriott Hotels; Marriott Hotels, Resorts and Suites; Renaissance Hotels, Resorts and Suites; Courtyard by Marriott; Residence Inn; Fairfield Inn; Towne Place Suites, Spring Hill Suites; The Ritz-Carlton hotels and Resorts; Marriott Conference Centers; vacation clubs and timeshare resorts; senior living communities and services; and foodservice distribution (http://marriott.com/corporateinfo/glance.mi?WT_Ref=mi_left accessed October 29, 2004).

Business Week has named Bill Marriott as one of the corporate elite. *Chief Executive Magazine* has named him a CEO of the year and *Fortune Magazine* has called him one of its 25 most fascinating business people. In 2004, for the seventh consecutive year, *Fortune Magazine* recognized Marriott International as one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For". Marriott ranked second on the list among companies with 100,000 or more employees, and is the only U.S. based lodging company on the list. Bill's commitment to his guests and to create a family friendly work environment for his associates is evidenced by *Working Mother Magazine*, for the 14th year, naming Marriott International among the "100 Best Companies for Working Mothers".

Minorities hold 50 percent of all supervisory positions within Marriott International. Bill Marriott has

stated that his 'commitment to diversity is absolute.' "It is the only way to attract, develop, and retain the very best talent available. It is the only way to forge the business relationships necessary to continue our dynamic growth. And it is the only way to meet our responsibilities to our associates, customers, partners, and other stakeholders. Our commitment is business focused. By improving the diversity of our global workforce we also create greater opportunities for an increasingly diverse group of suppliers, customers, owners, and franchisees" (<http://www.pceo.us/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=61> accessed October 29, 2004).

The **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** has ranked Marriott at the top of the lodging industry for the 6th time in its annual lodging industry report card, which focuses on employment, vendor relations, property ownership, advertising / marketing and charitable giving within the African-American Community (<http://marriott.com/corporateinfo/culture/recognitionDiversity.mi> accessed October 26, 2004).

The "Marriott Way", Bill's management philosophy, is the unique corporate culture cultivated by him. His management style includes concern for all associates, hands-on management, and an unrelenting commitment to meeting customer needs. He believes in excellence, quality, service, and hospitality. His philosophy is based on uncompromising beliefs in treating people fairly, working hard, paying close attention to details and listening to customers and giving them what they want (www.marriott.com accessed October 28, 2004). This is the foundation of Marriott International's preemi-

nence in the hospitality industry. Bill Marriott is a man to which those in and aspiring to success in the hospitality industry can point as evidence of the industry's professionalism, compassion and commitment to ethics, and social responsibility. For that, collectively we thank you Mr. Marriott.

One rarely knows the impact of a random act, a simple hello, a smiling face, or just being you. What follows are a few personal stories on the impact Bill Marriott had on people's lives.

Bill Marriott: Walks the Talk

Thank you, Mr. Marriott. As a former twenty-two year Marriott employee, one couldn't help but learn and be influenced by you, your vision, the attention to detail and your strong belief in being a positive role model for all you came in contact with. I remember seeing you regularly arriving at Marriott Corporate Headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland around 7 a.m. You worked hard, cared about all associates, and always modeled the behavior you expected from those you came in contact. You "walked the talk."

Thank you, Mr. Marriott, for traveling several hundred thousand miles each year and visiting over 250 hotels annually. When you visited our hotel, you demonstrated the importance of details by shaking every associate's hand, repeating their name, and connecting with each one. In addition, your ability to complete the most thorough property inspection in a short period of time was amazing and your rationale of why this was important to do namely "because it's my name on the hotel" still brings a smile to my face today. It was clear you were not only interested in the physical property, but you also wanted to know that our associates were happy in their work and you stressed the importance of creating an atmosphere that was conducive to make happy customers.

Thank you, Mr. Marriott, for being so detailed and numbers oriented. I never sat in on one of your budget meetings, but the numerous stories about your attention to detail and your thorough understanding of the business are monumental. Marriott's budgeting process has always been very rigorous, because both you and your father believed that accurate forecasts and budgets are the keys to strong performance. In my home office I have this statement above my computer, "the proper execution of details is the key to success in every endeavor."

Thank you, Mr. Marriott, for always believing in education, training and the personal development of all

your associates. In my career after I retired from Marriott, I became a university professor where I find myself using many of the principles and experience I gained while working at Marriott.

In my opinion, you are a strong example of the "Servant Leader" who does all he can do to make his people successful in reaching company goals. Instead of using the top of the management pyramid, you inverted the pyramid to try to make the work environment supportive of the employee. Teaching can have a similar focus. Our job is not to have a neat grade distribution or to be known as the "toughest" or "easiest" professor, but rather to help the students learn as much as they can, and to have them understand that we want them to succeed. If you can teach in a supportive and fun environment then everybody wins. Much like the hospitality industry, if you take good care of your employees (students), they'll take good care of your customers (their future employers).

Thank you, Mr. Marriott, for creating a Marriott culture that believes in consensus building. A leader in the hospitality industry must be prepared to make decisions, but if they have hired the right people, it's better that all concerned to have a voice in the decision making process. It is easier to commit to a project or a task that everyone agrees is the right action to take. How does this apply to academia? I believe, when we take the time to ask our students what is working well for them and what's not working before the semester is over; we can all make improvements in our classroom performance and in our students' performance. Surveys at the end of the semester are too late to help the student completing that course.