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Six Tips to Avoid a Communications Disaster in Hotel Takeovers

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All too often these days hotel acquisitions and management takeovers happen without any communications plan in place before the announcement is made to the media. A lot of attention is given to lawyers checking announcements, but little to thinking through the implications to all of the people who will affect the hotel's success after the takeover – from government officials, the media and travel trade, to staff and condo owners. And yet, the stakes are great. Ineffective handling of the announcement can result in lost business, tarnishing of the image of the property and management company (did they sell because business was weak), staff defections, and poor government relations. Here is a list of six tips to remember before making the announcement:

1. Involve your public relations manager or agency from the onset as well as the PR rep of the other company or property. Bring them in to develop a communications plan when negotiations get serious, and certainly before the letter of intent is signed. The PR manager or agency that has been handling the hotel knows the sensitivities and any existing issues that need to be considered or addressed.
2. Identify all possible audiences (“publics”) who might be impacted by the change, from staff and media to government officials, condo owners (if applicable), and the industry.
3. Prepare a statement asap that can be used to address any inquiries or calls as soon as serious discussions are taking place. This should be used reactively if there's a leak and the media should call and / or if the staff start to spread rumors. The timing on the release of any statement is delicate. You don't want to act prematurely; however, you also don't want false rumors floating around which can be just as damaging if not more so.
4. Prepare a “Q & A” where you anticipate all questions that will be asked by different parties and the answers. This will avoid your getting caught off guard by an eager reporter or top client. Ensure that all staff -- from the bellhop or doorman on up -- understands that they are to direct all inquiries, including those from guests, to the PR manager or other responsible executive.
5. Lay out tactics for addressing each of the publics. Sometimes a news release or letter will suffice or other times a major event or personal calls to key clients and opinion makers is called for. You also need to develop a plan for communicating effectively with employees (the employees should hear the news before it is given to the media).
6. Decide which of the parties will be the media contact. If the existing hotel management will be out immediately after the announcement, then there's no question; however, if there will be an overlap and if the desire is to maintain the value of the hotel name, it is critical that the current public relations contact be listed to project the continuity of management.

Above all, Prepare, Prepare, Prepare.