

# Hotel Business<sup>®</sup>

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## Q&A with Shruti Gandhi Buckley, Hampton by Hilton

As the new global brand head for Hampton by Hilton, Shruti Gandhi Buckley has a lot of responsibility—after all, the brand accounts for nearly 40% of Hilton’s global supply and pipeline. But the executive—who joined Hilton in early 2017 as VP, strategic initiatives, focused-service brands, following her time as VP/global brand manager of Marriott International’s Fairfield Inn & Suites and Protea Hotels brands—is up for the challenge. Here, she shares her plans with *Hotel Business*.



**What do you consider the most important part of your role?** My primary objective is to ensure Hampton maintains its leadership position in guest satisfaction and owner preference and continues to command the nearly 20% RevPAR premium it currently commands over the chain scale.

**How would you describe yourself as a leader?** I strive to always act with integrity, be strategic with clearly articulated business goals, and stay grounded in the mission to achieve strong results. I have a proven track record of inspiring teams toward innovation and excellence in all that we do, and I am committed to building strong relationships and collaborative partnerships. As an individual, I’ve been called “authentic” because what you see is what you get. And, I believe it’s important to infuse a little humor, which creates a more enjoyable work environment.

**How will your past experiences aid your future endeavors?** My nearly nine years at Marriott, leading two international brands, provided me a solid foundation for learning the global hospitality business and, more specifically, the upper-midscale tier. My marketing and branding experience with leading consumer product companies such as Nestle, Unilever and Estee Lauder provided me with a deep understanding of brand strategy and positioning, business management, marketing and PR—all areas that support my ability to successfully lead a global powerhouse like Hampton.

I’ve also lived, worked and/or traveled extensively throughout Asia, Europe, Central and South America, and Africa, providing a unique opportunity for me to gain an understanding of cultural nuances and specific market dynamics in the global arena.

**What were your impressions of the brand when you were at Marriott?** Hampton has long been the clear leader and innovator in the focused-service market and the first choice for owners and guests. During the nine years leading a key competitor, I always admired and

followed Hampton closely. Hampton is well known by competitors as being the clear market leader. I finally decided...if I can't beat them, I might as well join them!

**What five words would you say describe the brand?** Powerhouse, leader, innovative, thoughtful, trusted.

**How is the brand currently perceived by guests and potential guests?** Moving forward, is there anything about this perception that you'd like to change? For the past 30 years, Hampton has built a respected and trusted reputation and relationship with guests based on our friendly, authentic, caring and thoughtful service. It's our culture of doing little things that make a big difference for our guests.

That being said, we want our guests and potential guests to perceive us as a brand that is not afraid to push the envelope or change the ways we've done things in order to evolve the overall experience with the needs of today's traveler. We must stay relevant, so Hampton remains first choice for business and leisure guests.

**What must brands do to ensure they're keeping up with the guest's wants?** All brands should have a clear understanding of who their target consumer/guest is and what their needs are. Keeping a close pulse on trends and market dynamics is also key, and having a strong position on what the brand stands for is critical. These steps create the baseline for how the business should evolve. Brands must also continue to invest in their experience or product to stay on top of their game.

**Tell me a little bit about the pipeline.** With more than 2,275 properties, Hampton by Hilton has a presence in a multitude of locations, from high-density urban to suburban and tertiary markets highlighting the brands flexibility and broad appeal. We have more than 550 hotels in the global pipeline, the largest pipeline in the brand's history. And Hampton will enter another eight new countries in the coming year.

As the brand grows, so does its development in downtown locations and revitalized historic districts.

Global growth is an area of emphasis, with focus across Europe, Latin America and China. We are gaining momentum in the Middle East and other parts of Asia. Our first Hampton in the Middle East will open in Dubai in Q2 2018.

**What do you think is the most achievable goal for Hampton by Hilton in the next year?** We are in a solid position to continue with our strong financial performance and leadership position. We are constantly strengthening our core brand pillars—Guarantee, Consistency, Value and Service—to be relevant to our guests' preferences and deliver on developer needs.

With the top-notch talent we have at Hampton, all of these goals (and more) are more than achievable. In the next year, we will continue to focus on evolving our guest experience with the introduction of a new building prototype and public space decor. The new prototype is more efficient and will materialize in costs savings for developers. There are other critical guest experience touchpoints that we are working on and will introduce in the next 12 to 18 months—so more to come on that front.

**Looking at the overall industry, are there any external factors you're keeping an eye on?** Technology. Hilton has been at the forefront of pioneering technology across the portfolio with

the launch of Digital Key, the ability to select your room and new in-room technology features. Guests are looking for more technology-enabled hotel experiences and we are first movers in this space. HB