



Brand Launch – Case Study

The Task:

For over 20 years, Kimpton had quietly positioned itself as the originator of boutique hotels accompanied by popular chef-driven restaurants. When the company was created by Bill Kimpton, it was his decision to operate and market each hotel (and not the Kimpton name) as a unique stand alone concept with a European feel. This strategy defined the term “boutique” in the United States and went against the bland and anonymous feel of the mega chain hotels that were popular in the eighties.

Over the years, the industry and competitive landscape was changing and new boutique concepts were being introduced by hotel companies around the world. To maintain leadership and prepare for growth – Kimpton launched an extensive research program to determine its direction for the future. The findings showed that while existing guests loved the individual experience that each hotel gave them, they did not know the name Kimpton. Nor did they realize that Kimpton had other hotels in cities across America – even if they had stayed at multiple locations. They were not making the connection to the key features, amenities, style and personalized serviced standards that are all unique to a Kimpton stay. There were major opportunities to build brand loyalty among the existing fans of Kimpton Hotels – and to introduce new guests and the press to the true boutique experience as defined by the most successful boutique hotel company in the world.

The Approach: Every Hotel Tells a Story

It was determined that it would be a soft brand launch so that each hotel could maintain its individuality and name while sharing the brand – A Kimpton Hotel. To do this – internal and external campaigns were developed – each focused on the unique characteristics that exclusively define a Kimpton Hotel experience.

Kimpton enlisted a team of brand experts to help craft the key messaging. They conducted focus groups and research studies to define what the Kimpton brand meant to existing guests – and what potential guests (primarily business travelers) look for in a boutique hotel stay. It was determined that boutique guests are more interested in maintaining and extending their lifestyles on the road than they are in points or miles. Five key brand elements were developed to define the Kimpton brand – care, comfort, style, flavor and fun. In addition, the key brand lifestyle programs that must be present in every Kimpton hotel were refined or created. While each hotel was encouraged to tell its own story – for the brand launch it was crucial that they all share the signature brand programs such as the complimentary evening wine hour, a signature chef-driven restaurant, Kimpton Cares (national community involvement), pet friendliness, eco awareness, Mind.Body.Spa. as well as specific efforts for women business travelers and the GLBT community.

Once everything was in place, a one year brand launch program began.

The Activities:

The strategic roll-out of the Kimpton brand included staff training, a guest awareness plan and a comprehensive PR campaign.

Staff Training – A team of Kimpton executives went around the country on a brand road show to train the internal network of 5000 employees on the brand.

Guest Awareness – The Kimpton InTouch guest loyalty program was established as a tool to market the new brand and all its elements to new and existing guests. Guests are encouraged to sign up for Kimpton InTouch to receive special incentives and news about Kimpton Hotels and the restaurants. The loyalty program is based on number of stays – and rewards are focused on individual guest lifestyles. Kimpton brand collateral was also created and placed strategically throughout each hotel. The website was also totally revamped to reflect the brand and all the key programs.

PR campaign – The goal of the PR campaign was to generate features and coverage in consumer lifestyle, business, special interest and hospitality trade media vehicles. The focus of each release and event was on the brand elements – care, comfort, style, flavor and fun, as well as the history of the company and the key lifestyle programs unique to Kimpton. The President and COO were presented as the spokespeople for the campaign. The first touch point to the Kimpton brand for the media was the delivery of a custom-made, playful storybook that told the Kimpton story through its signature brand elements. Each page of the storybook highlighted the significance of each element to the brand. Kimpton then hosted three elaborate press events in key markets—New York, Chicago and San Francisco for selected media.

Kimpton positioned key executives as representatives of the Kimpton lifestyle. Niki Leondakis, COO spoke about the Women In Touch program and Kimpton’s commitment to diversity and community involvement. Tom LaTour, Chairman and CEO spoke about the history of Kimpton, the growth plans and the signature wine hour program – as winemaking is one of his biggest passions.

The Results: In the two years since the launch of the Kimpton brand, the coverage has been incredible. Kimpton has solidified its standing as the leader in boutique hotel segment and as a recognizable name associated with a hotel stay that is personalized, unique, caring and quite fun.

To date, there have been well over 100 placements in prestigious publications such as Money Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, Inc. Magazine, the New York Times, Food and Wine Magazine, USA Today, the Robb Report and Conde Nast Traveler to name a few. In addition there have been numerous national, regional and local consumer and trade mentions on each of the brand programs. While the restaurants are not branded Kimpton – they continue to receive critical acclaim in every market.

The growth of the company has also exploded since the launch. Eight new hotels and restaurants have opened across the country and the plan for future expansion is robust. Revenues have also seen double digit increases in the last two years and Kimpton has raised \$200,000 for its three key charities – Dress for Success, Trust for Public Land and the National AIDS Fund.

The Kimpton InTouch guest loyalty program now has over 100,000 active members.