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## Cornell Sustainability Roundtable: In Search of the "Green Bullet" to Aid in Green Hotel Efforts

### Conflicting demands and fear of "greenwashing" inhibit hotels' efforts toward sustainable operations

Ithaca, NY, November 18, 2009 – Participants in Cornell's first [Sustainability Roundtable](#) concluded that a major challenge facing the hotel industry is to define exactly what "green" means. Hoteliers looking to create a green hotel are caught in a situation where standards are inconsistent and consumers' views are unclear. Thus, hotels are sometimes reluctant to implement sustainable systems, especially given sometimes lengthy payback periods.

The [Sustainability Roundtable](#), held in October 2009 at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, was produced by the [Center for Hospitality Research](#) (CHR) and chaired by Associate Professor David Sherwyn.

"Sustainability has emerged rapidly as an industry concern," Sherwyn pointed out. "Ten years ago, if we said we were going to have a discussion about sustainability, and if we told them that we were going to have a roundtable with twenty-five participants from top-level global companies, they would have told us we were insane. I credit three of our graduates, Eric Ricaurte, Walker Lunn, and Crist Inman, that we are now in a position to hold an annual sustainability roundtable."

While participants agreed that the industry needs to improve the environmental performance of its operations, most hotels encounter substantial barriers to implementation. Hoteliers still need to determine exactly which "green" hotel practices are most effective, for instance, and they must consider payback periods to demonstrate the value of financing such initiatives. Practices with a payback period exceeding three to seven years are difficult to contemplate and finance.

Consumers are the great unknown in this equation, particularly because they may conclude that some hotel practices amount to "greenwashing," which involves exaggerating the environmental value of certain hotel practices. In that regard, some hotel operators have quietly focused on the triple bottom approach to sustainable development, to avoid the greenwashing accusation.

Roundtable participants recommended that the hotel industry develop clear indices of sustainability, even though that means combining the sometimes competing interests of owners, management firms, and guests. This would be prudent however, given the alternative of individually addressing the national and global proliferation of regulations, standards, and certifications. "We have all heard that 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it,'" said Eric Ricaurte of EnviRelation, LLC. "But managing all the measurements of sustainability is now just as daunting a task for the sustainability officer." Thus, participants suggested developing a "green bullet," a realistic measure of sustainability that would involve creating and sharing effective sustainability models to move the industry forward and to develop a realistic measure of sustainability.

As explained by associate professor Alex Susskind, sustainable operations is a key area of research at the School of Hotel Administration. Because of the importance of guests' opinions, the Center for Hospitality Research is working with Philips, a CHR partner, to assess the impact of sustainable operations on guest satisfaction at the Statler Hotel (the school's teaching hotel). CHR is also working with data from PKF Hospitality Research, a CHR friend, to determine the financial impact of sustainable



Left to right: Michele Diener, Director of Corporate Sustainability Strategies, MGM Mirage; Hervé Houdré, Regional Director of Operations and General Manager, Barclay InterContinental Hotel; and Lee Stein, Managing Member, Prize Capital, LLC

projects, as explained by professor Rohit Verma, CHR executive director.

#### **About CHR Roundtables:**

[CHR roundtables](http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/events/roundtables/) are a meeting place for invited senior-level hospitality industry executives and Cornell faculty members. Each roundtable lasts one day and is divided into four or five sessions. Sessions begin with a short research presentation (by a Cornell faculty member, faculty from another institution, or an industry leader) that lasts five to ten minutes. Immediately following, one or two industry discussants either support or contest the researcher's hypothesis or conclusion. The conversation is then opened up to the entire roundtable for discussion. For more information on roundtables, please visit:

<http://www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/events/roundtables/>.

#### **About The Center for Hospitality Research**

*A unit of the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, The Center for Hospitality Research (CHR) sponsors research designed to improve practices in the hospitality industry. Under the lead of the center's 78 corporate affiliates, experienced scholars work closely with business executives to discover new insights into strategic, managerial and operating practices. The center also publishes the award-winning hospitality journal, the Cornell Hospitality Quarterly. To learn more about the center and its projects, visit [www.chr.cornell.edu](http://www.chr.cornell.edu).*

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