

Bernhard Brender - General Manager, Grand Hilton Seoul, South Korea



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Bernhard Brender, general manager of Grand Hilton Seoul, discusses the role of his conference centre and the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) industry in general in the economic development of Seoul and its relevance in terms of bringing innovation and investment to the Korean healthcare and pharmaceutical industries.

As general manager of Grand Hilton Seoul, can you please introduce yourself to our international audience?

I am of German descent and during my career, I have worked in Switzerland, France, England, Manila, Bangkok and Indonesia before settling in Korea. I have been living in Korea since 1991 and became an honorary citizen in 2006. In Seoul, I have worked at the Starwood and Hilton hotels, among others.

From my experiences in different countries, I have learned that you can never expect a red carpet in any country, that you have to start from scratch, respect the tradition and accept the differences. For the locals, you are just a foreigner so in order to be respected, you must respect first.

As a hotelier, I must first ensure that the standards of the Grand Hilton chain, which counts more than 3,500 hotels around the world, are respected here in Korea. There are five Hilton hotels in Korea, and I must make sure we meet the standards that our guests expect from us. Personally, my standards are based on safety, security, hygiene and sanitation. Since I started as a cook in the kitchen, I have learned to trust my nose, I can smell whether anything is burnt or rotten; listening and watching the people around is also key to maintaining the balance in the hotel. Being close to the employees gives me the chance to train them and to ensure the quality of our services. Especially as general manager, I like knowing what is going on in the hotel and keeping people by my side, which is why I try to know my employees and the union. For me, prevention is better than cure, so my door is always open for them to come in.

How would you assess Grand Hilton Seoul's position within the competitive landscape of the MICE industry in Korea?

Our hotel is three in one: 110 suite apartments, a convention centre and 396 hotel rooms. We offer MICE incentives to our clients, such as discounts for the pharmaceutical experts that attend our conferences to stay with us rather than go home for an hour and get stuck in traffic.

Our business model is based on conventions. For pharmaceutical conventions, 40 percent of attendees are foreigners while 60 percent are Korean. We provide our guests with all the things they expect from the Hilton standards, they know that we have high-quality food and rooms, and they expect to pay the price. Although we are not cheap, we have a loyalty program with four levels - diamond, gold, silver and bronze members - so the more our customers stay with us, the more special treatment they can receive. Moreover, we have nine different brands with different price ranges.

What kind of advantages do you offer to MICE customers?

Anytime we host a pharma or healthcare event, the scientists that attend need rooms, so we offer them 20-30 percent discounts, depending on the volume of the conference. Our location allows us to offer 2,000 parking spaces, and we have a bus and a subway station, which attracts Korean experts as well.

The reason why MICE is our main focus is because 90 percent of them are businessmen and women that need a place to stay where they can trust the safety standards are met, the equipment

is working, internet connection is fast and free, and quality food is there when they are hungry.

You built the conference centre in 2010 to cater to the needs of MICE customers, what has been the impact in terms of growth?

Since I came here in 2006, the hotel has gained a lot of recognition. Our guests and conference costumers repeat their stay because they know they can do business here. We gather leaders from 26 different countries, which is very powerful. They wanted a convention centre where they could do business, and since business creates business, we built it. This new convention centre has brought the Grand Hilton both recognition and a positive impact on our bottom line.

What has been the impact of the business and investment that Grand Hilton has brought on the economic development of Seoul?

In the past few years, conference centres have grown like mushrooms, which has led to a ten percent increase for the city in terms of economic growth.

This development has also motivated cooperation and support between different business sectors. For instance, we have a close collaboration with the COEX, Korea's largest convention centre. It is located close to the Grand Hilton and we provide shuttle buses to take people to their conventions. Supporting each other and communicating is key for us, we cannot get isolated. We must ensure people realize that there is someone else that cares about their business and feel responsible for their success.

What makes Grand Hilton the partner of choice for pharmaceutical and healthcare companies looking to organize an event?

The first reason why many of the major healthcare and pharma events have been hosted at Grand Hilton Seoul, such as the KOA (Korean Orthopaedic Association (2017) or the KDDW (Korea Digestive Disease Week (2017), as well as the upcoming International Digestive Endoscopy Network 2019 (IDEN 2019) in June, is due to our privileged location.

We offer a safe and secure place that is out of the hassle downtown, we have an entrance that makes them feel at home, and we offer three different options - apartments, rooms and a

convention centre – that are well connected. This is very powerful and makes us an attractive option. In addition, we offer different benefits and advantages to repeat event organizers.

The way in which we operate in the case of events such as IDEN 2019, who have organized more than one event with us, consists on booking the space and making a down payment. In this case, there will be 700 attendees. In addition to the KOA, the KDDW and IDEN, we are the preferred space for events such as the Microsoft convention, and for companies such as KLM and Lufthansa. There are many reasons to choose the Grand Hilton as the venue of choice. We do our homework and make them feel at home.

How do you make sure as an event planner of the perfect execution of events?

When a big event is coming, we gather every department in what we call the Blue Ocean Room, from the kitchen and house-keeping to marketing, sales and finance. Then, the event planner tells everyone how many people will be coming, from which day to which, and shares all the particularities and details that we may need to ensure perfect execution. We take into consideration the background of all our guests, such as their religion and dietary preferences or restrictions, in order to provide personalized attention and to anticipate anything they might need.

We also consider any other event which might be taking place at the same time so as to prevent the two events from interfering with one another or with the quality of our services. We all make sure to execute the plan so we can provide not only what guests need but also what they want every step of the way.

What is your final message to our international readers about the Grand Hilton Seoul?

I would like them to know that we are really committed to fulfilling their needs. Once Grand Hilton Seoul commits to an event, we do our homework, we anticipate, and we have the willingness to serve rather than dictate to our customers what they want. We are also aware of our responsibilities and we work towards maintaining the right balance. I have learnt how to delegate, but I cannot abdicate.

What is your motivation to come to work every day and the reasons for your commitment to the Grand Hilton Seoul?

My motivation is making things right. I start my working day at 9 o'clock in the morning with the first briefing, and I stay as late as is necessary. If any problem arises, I like to be close by to be able to assist my customers personally. I am committed to finding the potential in my employees and training them to take care of our guests, so they want to come back. For them, my door is always open. This is the reason why I forgive the small things and give second chances.

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