Most independent local hotels receive low ratings

$225,000 report shows improving services will be no day at the beach

BY JOANISABEL GONZALEZ-VELAZQUEZ

About 85% of local independent hotels received only one or two stars in Puerto Rico's first-ever mystery-shopper evaluation of nonflagged hotels. The evaluation cost $225,000.

In mystery shopping, reviewers pretend to be clients to evaluate and rate products. The Tourism Co. hired consulting firm Diamond Hospitality to carry out the evaluation. Nonflagged hotels are those with no affiliation with hotel chains.

The results are no surprise for outgoing Tourism Co. Executive Director Jose Suarez, who said the results only reaffirm that there is still much to be done to improve the quality of service in the local hospitality industry.

"We need to improve service more than anything," said Suarez. "The hospitality industry, [particularly nonflagged properties], should take advantage of this survey, which involves an official and standardized evaluation."

The mystery shoppers gave 49 hotels one star, 61 hotels two stars, 16 hotels three stars, and one, four stars. Only three of the 130 properties received no star at all; none received the top score of five stars.

The report pointed to the need to establish better contact with guests. "A frequent complaint was that hotel employees didn't make eye contact with guests when they checked in," said Suarez. "The [results show] check-in must be people-oriented, not task-oriented. Another weakness is inconsistency in how hotels define meal offerings. At one, a continental breakfast includes pastries, cereal, and fruit; at another, it consists...of crackers."

Inn on the Blue Horizon, owned by hotelier James Weis, received three stars in the first star-rating evaluation conducted for the Tourism Co. The report described the property as a true gem with outstanding landscaping, architecture, and decor.

Hotel facilities also need to improve. Mattress covers and additional storage space are basic amenities all hotels should start offering guests right away, Suarez said. "These are oversights training can correct," he said.

Despite the many requirements tourism properties must comply with, Suarez said independent reviewers are useful as they offer a fresh perspective. "Hotel chains use evaluations from mystery shoppers all the time, which helps to improve operations," he added.

The evaluation took place after the Tourism Co. hired Diamond Hospitality this summer (CB June 17). Meanwhile, a Star-Rating Committee, made up of 12 private-sector members, chose the evaluation methodology and will advise the Tourism Co. on how to correct problems. Last week, Diamond Hospitality met with the committee to discuss the report and how to implement the recommendations.

Suarez called the results more than acceptable considering many hotel owners have no formal education in tourism.

Puerto Rico's hotel star-rating system includes more than 100 criteria in two categories (hotel facilities and services), each representing 50% of the score.

Suarez said the Tourism Co. will prepare a series of islandwide workshops to discuss report findings with hoteliers and hospitality professionals.

Star ratings will be published in the government-sponsored Que Pasa! magazine. Hotel owners have already received their evaluations. ■