

Passionate About the Hotel Industry

An Interview with Jody Merl,
President, Innovative Travel Marketing

EDITORS' NOTE As Founder of Innovative Travel Marketing (*innovative-travelmarketing.com*) Jody Merl has not only forged solid relationships with an array of companies, from Ian Schrager Hotels to The Breakers Palm Beach and the SydeLL Group, but has also earned a reputation for saving hotel and travel companies millions of dollars by monetizing perishable, unsold inventory that could have gone to waste. Her recently expanded Newspaper Print and Digital division affords global multicultural reach for a broad category of clients. Merl cofounded and endowed the ITM Hospitality Fund, a New York City-wide program that provides no-cost hotel rooms to needy patients and their families who face the daunting expense of traveling to Manhattan for critical medical treatment.



Jody Merl

What was your vision in creating Innovative Travel Marketing (ITM) and how has the company evolved over the years?

When I founded the company in 1992, with many years of hotel sales and marketing experience under my belt, my goal was to create the leading strategic media planning and buying company to specialize in the hospitality/travel sector and to use “barter leverage” to help clients maximize exposure, add value and enhance results. We launched Ian Schrager’s Paramount, Turnberry Isle Resort & Club, and developed tactical campaigns for the opening of Ritz-Carlton in Aspen, St. Thomas, Jamaica and others. In the interim, we forged exceptional relationships with media corporations and heightened our expertise to the point that we deliver unrivaled media buys and become “the essential ingredient” in expanding a hotel company’s marketing budget and buying power.

It was always important to me that we tailor our services to the distinct needs and preferences of each client. We’ve done that by remaining a niche firm devoted to custom solutions and personalized service, even as our client base – and their loyalty – has grown over our 25 years in business. With our extensive industry knowledge and exceptional capabilities, we bolster brand and tactical campaigns in targeted ways that ultimately increase direct business, occupancy, rate and profit.

What are the key services and solutions that ITM provides to the hospitality industry?

For a hotel to be top of mind with its consumer travelers, travel agents and meeting planners,

its value proposition must be communicated and strengthened with an integrated marketing plan that influences the buyer’s choice. ITM works in all media channels, including print, digital, social media, broadcast, and out-of-home, and utilizes promotional vehicles and marketing resources such as direct mail, merchandise, collateral and loyalty programs to optimize the impact of every dollar of a budget.

Quite often, we provide hotels with lucrative opportunities to monetize their rooms (a perishable commodity) to fund targeted advertising placements and pro-

motions. By using rooms to expand cash budgets or create trade-based budgets, we provide our clients with a fantastic resource of marketing dollars – a much smarter strategy than discounting or succumbing to high, third-party costs.

In return, we place our corporate and media clients in the hotel to increase occupancy and revenue when rooms are available without fees.

What differentiates ITM in the marketplace?

My team and I are extremely passionate about the hotel industry, and we understand all the nuances that impact every facet of the business. In that regard, we are partners, not just service providers. We truly help hotels empower their budgets with cash-saving, strategic marketing and financial solutions to help these properties stand out and gain a competitive edge. We can do this whether a hotel is operating at peak business levels, debuting in an overcrowded market, or trying to build market share amidst a strong competitive set.

The ITM Advantage is rooted in our unique, lucrative relationships with our media clients, which bear extraordinary benefits for our client hotels. Through our close working rapport with media’s top-level executives and frontline account teams, we’re able to deliver amazing upgrades and added-value hospitality promotions to add even more “wow” to their media buys.

How broad is the target market for ITM?

We have diversified our client base across all segments and specialized our services to their needs. While our roots are in the luxury sector, which remains a dominant market for us, we work with all categories of hotels, resorts and cruise lines, including boutique lifestyle city properties, resorts, spas, conference centers; from high-end to mid-market to economy to extended stay; independent hotels and hotel groups. We are blessed to have earned an enduring list of clients such as

Ian Schrager, The Breakers Palm Beach, Furnished Quarters and The Lodge at Woodloch. We also take pride in helping emerging brands like Arlo Hotels, The LINE and Freehand to make their mark in a competitive landscape. On the media front, we have amazing relationships with companies as wide-ranging as Hearst, Bloomberg Media, CBS Radio/Entercom and Outfront Media.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for ITM?

Our treasured, loyal clients remain our best advocates, and their testimonials fuel our growth in business.

We do find the strongest potential among hotel owners and executives who take a more entrepreneurial approach to their business. They naturally embrace the idea of buying more for less, and our unique procurement of cost-effective media that uses barter to stretch budgets, bolster purchasing power and deliver added-value promotions. We appeal to savvy hoteliers who want to deploy their marketing initiatives as smartly and effectively as possible and make the most of their limited resources. With so many diverse brands in the landscape, our buying expertise and quick turnaround has helped many new brands launch quickly. Our understanding of sales as well as marketing enables ITM to support the success of the limited staff at boutique properties. Further, as media clients integrate print and digital with outdoor to maximize reach, ITM media clients recommend our services too.

What are your key priorities for ITM as you look to the future?

I like to think that, in the realm of hotel marketing, we have started a movement to shift the industry’s focus away from the dictates of budget and toward optimizing cash flow, which is an important distinction that rewards owners and operators for profitability, as opposed to emphasizing top-line revenue, cost-cutting and discount tactics. This mindset fortifies hotels for the long term, regardless of the peaks and valleys of economic cycles. We will continue to be the seamless support of a hotel’s marketing department to maximize their exposure and define their brand. ITM wants to be the go to source for luxury lifestyle hotels to stand out in the marketplace. We have delivered hundreds of millions of dollars in media to support hotel sales efforts, and our firm has literally saved our clients millions of dollars by transforming their unsold room inventory that, otherwise, might have gone to waste into marketing currency. These are benchmarks of success we want to sustain for the future. ●