

Richard C. Kessler, Art of a Trendsetter

By Stephen M. Lebruto

Introduction

Visionary, pioneer, trendsetter, and innovator are attributes often used to describe successful leaders in business. However, once in a while there is that one person who has more prominence and ingenuity than others, a person with an extraordinary talent for business. In the hospitality industry, a hotel mogul by the name of Richard C. Kessler is that person with “Grand Flair”... an energetic, insightful visionary who sees the impossible.

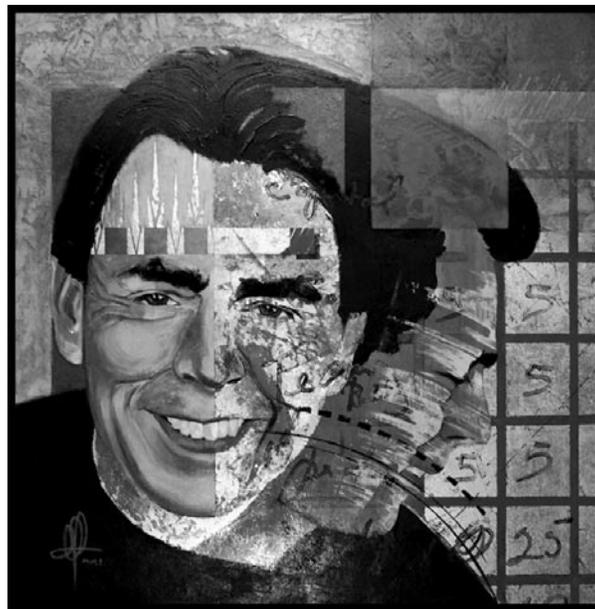
Combining a keen business sense and vision for the future of the hotel industry, Richard C. Kessler’s concept of Kessler Collection Hotels has made him a trendsetter in the hospitality industry. The Kessler Collection consists of a portfolio of nine individually themed hotels and resorts, the 500-acre Silverwood Plantation residential community, the 900-acre Georgia North International Industrial Park, and other commercial land developments making him a nationally recognized industry leader.

The Early Years

Kessler was born in the small Georgia town of Rincon with a population of 500. This turn of the century railroad town is nestled across from the Savannah River

and is located 20 miles away from historic downtown Savannah (The City of Rincon, Georgia 2006). Richard attended the Jerusalem Lutheran Church on nearby Ebenezer Road, founded by exiled Austrian immigrants who settled in Georgia in 1734. There they built the city, established a church, and created an orphanage.

Kessler grew up on a farm where his passion for collecting and appreciation of the arts began. As a young boy, his first collection consisted of rocks from a nearby railroad and he used them to place around



trees, which today is an “art form” used in landscaping. This habit of collecting continues today as he admits that he “still collects rocks” now in the form of artwork and property. The boutique hotels and his arrangements are anything but random. Throughout his early years, his love for music, art, and culture continued to grow.

While neither of his parents attended college, Richard learned early in life to create over-sized goals in order to achieve great things. Kessler was the president of his freshman class and the Beta Club in high school. He was voted by his senior class as the most likely to succeed. As fate would have it, their prediction has come true. With the help of a guidance counselor in high school, Kessler sought a challenge

and chose to attend Georgia Institute of Technology where he earned a bachelors and masters degree in Industrial Engineering and Operations Technology.

According to Kessler, “We talked about colleges for a few minutes and I said to him (the guidance counselor), ‘What’s the most difficult school in Georgia?’ His reply was, ‘Academically, the toughest school in Georgia is Georgia Tech.’ I said, ‘Fine, that’s where I want to go. I’ll take on the most difficult.’” Kessler stated, “Georgia Tech was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. You get tough. You have to be to survive. But I never dropped or failed a course. Georgia Tech really taught me tenacity. When I left Tech, I was very focused. I knew how to work. I had a lot of good conceptual ideas. I had developed a sense of how to build an organization. I had very clear mental images of what I wanted to do.”

Foundation

Richard has a feel for risks. “It’s an intuitive process,” he explains. “Good risk takers and those with good intuition go hand in hand. You learn to have confidence in your own intuition versus the impossible.” (Georgia Tech Alumni Association, 2006). During his 35-year career, those risks have rewarded Kessler with successes that have made him one of Florida’s most celebrated hotel developers. As founder and chairman of The Kessler Enterprise, he has launched a series of signature hotels with distinctive themes.

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Early in his career and despite graduating Georgia Tech with a highly coveted degree in engineering, he sought to enter the realm of real estate. After college in 1970, he consulted with a family friend a real estate developer, Cecil B. Day, regarding career opportunities. Day referred him to several contacts and Kessler received two job offers, but neither seemed to peak his interest. He discussed this with Day, who then offered Kessler what turned out to be an opportunity of a lifetime.

The two worked together with the founding and expansion of Days Inn of America. Kessler served as President, CEO, and Chairman of Days Inn of America from 1975 until 1984 where he initiated a redirection of product quality, management and franchise relations. This resulted in Days Inns being recognized by the Federal Reserve as one of the best-managed companies in the South. Sensing the potential for phenomenal growth in Florida in the early 1970s, Kessler established Day Realty of Orlando in 1972 and began developing and successfully operating over 3,000 rooms in Orlando.

Based on his belief that there was more appeal in real estate, Richard established The Kessler Enterprise in 1985, comprising of several subsidiaries involved in the development of industrial parks, residential areas, and regional banking (Selwitz, 2000). He also began developing theme-oriented upscale hotels, operated as Grand Theme Hotels Inc. Believing that people want to be entertained, have fun, and be comfortable when they stay at a hotel on business or on vacation, Kessler developed his vision for themed hotels. In 1995,

he built, opened and continues to operate The Doubletree Castle Hotel in Orlando. Kessler bought and sold the 490-room Days Inn at Lake Buena Vista after successfully operating that property for almost two years and developing a safari design and themed concept. It was renamed the Sheraton Safari Hotel, The Kessler Collection's first affiliated hotel.

In February 1997, Kessler opened the Hampton Inn Savannah North in Savannah, Georgia and within two short years later, he opened three additional new hotels and completely renovated a 21-story 1940's Hollywood themed Sheraton Studio City Hotel in Orlando. The 115-room delightfully charming Celebration Hotel, located in Disney's town of Celebration, opened in November 1999 and in December 1999, the 112-year old historical Casa Monica Hotel located in the heart of downtown St. Augustine, opened its doors after a complete renovation.

Another addition to The Kessler Collection was The Westin Grand Bohemian, with 250 rooms in the heart of Downtown Orlando (The Kessler Collection, 2006). In 2003, Kessler Enterprises invested in a 159-room property across from the Sheraton Studio City Hotel and themed it as a "hip western themed property" naming it the Red Horse Inn. The hotel was a short-term investment for The Kessler Collection and was successfully sold. Last year, Kessler unveiled The Mansion on Forsyth Park, a 126-room property representing the only luxury hotel in Savannah, Georgia (Official Savannah Guide, 2006).

In addition to the many interests of Richard Kessler, his love for the great outdoors has led him to develop the Kessler Canyon Ranch, a 22,500 acre nature ranch in Grand Junction, CO. The Kessler Canyon provides outstanding experiences in hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain climbing and other outdoor physical activities. Companies seeking a special venue/setting for executive retreats find the Kessler Canyon to be just the right place for team building, fun, relaxation and a sense of enhanced spirituality.

Future Visions

Richard C. Kessler sees a new niche developing within the hospitality business with the emergence of integrated development projects that combines a hotel, restaurants, art galleries, and residences all in one facility. His latest project in St. Petersburg, Florida, the Grand Bohemian Hotel and Residences is modeled under this niche and will set the tone for his future

developments. This \$140-million mixed use development is the most ambitious to date for Richard Kessler and his Kessler Enterprise. He has said, "People are busier than ever nowadays and they want the convenience of having everything all together" (R.C. Kessler, personal communication, February 20, 2006; Weinstein, 2005).

There are a number of additional projects in various stages which will significantly increase The Kessler Collection portfolio of boutique hotels within the next three to five years. While some of these hotels currently fly franchise flags, Kessler intends to bring them totally within his own brand of The Kessler Collection in that same five-year period. He has begun the process of conversion through the creative use of mainstream technology to allow virtual tours of the properties, reservations, and other guest services thereby eliminating some of the big advantages of the national franchises; namely perceived common quality of the facilities and a national reservation system (Wolff, 2000).

The Westin Grand Bohemian Hotel in Orlando, Florida is one of the most successful properties within the Kessler Collection with "outstanding service and pampering amenities have garnered numerous honors including being named to Condé Nast Traveler's 2003 Gold List, and Travel & Leisure's list of 'The Greatest Hotels in the World,' as well as voted 'Best in Brand' from Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide." (The Kessler Collection, 2006). Additionally at the Mansion on Forsyth Park in Savannah, Georgia, Kessler has opened a new public cooking school called the 700 Kitchen as well as its first

spa called the Poseidon Spa and the second Grand Bohemian Art Gallery. In fact, all future full service boutique hotels will boast a spa and art gallery as part of the hotel's overall facilities.

A Passion for the Arts

Mr. Kessler's passion for art and history is present and strongly influential to his collection. Also, his connection and appreciation of music and the arts is a combination of both his family heritage and his desire to seek a clearer understanding. Presently, his love of the arts can best be admired in a visit to one of his many hotels in the Kessler Collection. His extensive collection of art pieces is an extension of Kessler's passion to entertain and educate others on the subject. Throughout his business career he has kept a professional artist on his payroll. Often times Kessler will utilize his artistic resources to win over political influences in an effort to aid humanitarian causes. His lifelong philosophy of "see the invisible and do the impossible" still leads him in not only in his business but also in his life adventures.

Kessler's interest in of theology can be traced back to early in his childhood life. Always present was a zest and curiosity in learning more about the spirit and purpose of life. This early influence inspired a vision to create a place where help could be provided to those who were not capable of caring for themselves. Early in his career, while only making \$14,000 per year, Richard was able to acquire the necessary funds which would initiate the creation of a Christian Family Retreat Conference Center in Georgia. Today, this center at-

tracts youth from all across Georgia and teaches them many of the traits which will help improve their quality of life. Some of the programs include: personal etiquette, the history of Georgia, and respect of the environment.

Giving Back

Richard Kessler is proud of his background and has provided funds and support to Emory University in Atlanta to gather the largest collection of original books and writings from the Protestant Reformation Period. Not only does he express his enthusiasm for humanities, he also has a passion for aiding children all over the world. Kessler offers multiple scholarships. True to his passion for art and music he has established the Kessler/Grand Bohemian Scholarship Fund where multiple scholarships are awarded to deserving Orange County Public School (Florida) art, drama and music teachers at all different grade levels. Each of the winners receives a \$2,000 stipend to use to support their personal development, a crystal plaque and a two-night weekend stay at The Westin Grand Bohemian.

Richard expressed a heart felt desire to develop feeding programs aimed to feed children throughout the United States. Surprised to learn that over 30 million children in America go to bed hungry at night he felt the need to get involved. Without a doubt by Kessler taking this on this challenge, the children of America will be the beneficiaries.

His efforts have helped establish the Pitts Theology Library. His personality is reflected in a quote from the Library director, M. Patrick Graham who said, "I've heard many people call him a visionary because he's not satisfied with doing the same thing,"

Kessler's View on Leadership

Kessler combines an uncanny business sense with extraordinary creative energy and a passionate dedication to purpose. This talent has served him well over his 35 plus year career in the hospitality industry. Kessler believes that an organization's leader must have a clear vision and have the ability to convey that vision to others. As head of The Kessler Collection, he believes his duty includes creating goals that exceed expectations, inspiring people to put forth a greater effort than the minimum required.

Kessler surrounds himself with the brightest and best individuals in the hospitality and real estate development arenas. The experience and background

that each of his senior team leaders brings to the table are in areas such as site selection, development, construction, and operations. The team contributes to Kessler's vision to change and create a new segment in the lodging industry.

One word sums up Kessler's managerial style: teamwork. Kessler believes that an organization's strengths reside in synergy, the sum of the parts being greater than the individual parts. For this reason, he places a strong emphasis on finding energetic, passionate people with various talents who will stimulate the group and motivate everyone in the organization to reach their full potential, thus making the organization itself successful.

His philosophy revolves around passion where the goal is larger than the norm. He looks for energetic people with a variety of talents. Additionally, he looks for the best and hires the best. He works with his employees side by side, rewards them and makes them feel they are part of the team while holding a high work ethic. This helped him build a successful organization. However, Kessler warns any potential employee that "if you're not willing to be a part of something that takes 110%, you need to go somewhere else" (R.C. Kessler, personal communication, February 20, 2006).

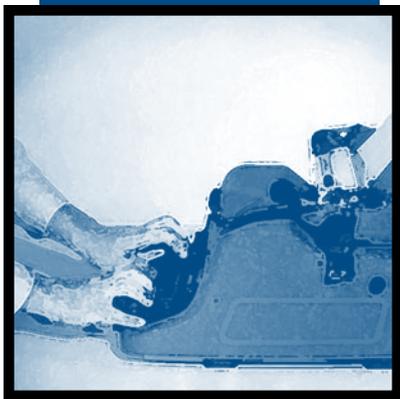
This philosophy can also be seen in the way he structures organizations. He resists heavy formal structures because they stifle creativity. He believes that operational flexibility is the key to survival in the marketplace. This loose management structure has allowed his company to become a major player in the high end boutique hotel

market. A loosely structured organization inspires the best in people: "By keeping a loose structure it allows people to do more than they think they were trained to do." Kessler realizes that as his company grows there may be a need for more "structure," but he has also seen how, in larger corporations, sometimes there are "too many other things" going on and the product takes second place. Kessler has pride in that at the Kessler Collection the product has remained the primary focus, "the real thing."

Richard C. Kessler a man of vision, a man who inspires, an innovator, a loving husband and father, a devoted friend and leader. He is a true "Renaissance Man."

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