

# Hotel News Now

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## Hampton's new leader on brand pet peeves, future plans

The 30-year-old brand has a new global head in Shruti Buckley, who brings a diverse brand experience to Hilton. Despite decades of success for the brand, Buckley said she's determined not to let it rest on its accolades.



Shruti Buckley stepped into the role of global head of the Hampton by Hilton brand in September, with a brand pedigree spanning Marriott International, Nestle, Chanel, National Geographic and more.

She joined Hilton earlier this year as VP of strategic initiatives and focused-service brands, leading special projects and initiatives across the company's Hampton by Hilton, Hilton Garden Inn and Tru by Hilton brands. Before that, she was VP and global brand manager of Marriott's Fairfield Inn & Suites and Protea Hotels brands.

A big goal in Buckley's new role at Hampton is to not let the brand get too comfortable. "This brand is 30 years old; it's had an incredible history, strong, consistent leadership and Hilton's constant investment in this brand, both in marketing and at the brand-initiative level," she said. "The biggest thing we have to keep our eye on is not getting too comfortable. We have a strong performance lead, but one of the lessons I've learned is you never underestimate the competition. Make sure you're always looking toward the future and making the brand relevant." We asked Buckley some questions on the topics of brand relevance, what she's looking forward to in her role and more.

**Hotel News Now: What are some of your short-term goals for Hampton?**

**Buckley:** "One is growth. We're now in 18 countries, and there's plenty of opportunity. We're looking at another eight countries in 2018, so that's really exciting. The second priority is focusing on the guest experience. We have an opportunity to talk to our guests and see how their needs are changing—how people are evolving in what they want from hotels—and we're distilling that down into what we need to do on the product side, whether it's with F&B, design and more. The third piece is service. That's been one of Hampton's secret ingredients to great success—that commitment to service and a service culture. Hampton was the first in its category to roll it out. How do we continue to dial up that service experience, especially when the digital aspect of what we do is expanding?"

**HNN: Tell us a little more about Hampton's global expansion plans.**

**Buckley:** "China continues to be an emphasis. The European continent is a key focus area, and there are things we're doing there in particular to evolve the F&B experience so we stay relevant. Latin America is another area of focus for us. Next year we'll open our first hotel in Dubai, which will be the first in the Middle East region. It's a great market for us to gain some presence in and expose the brand to a new area and new consumer. Then of course the Asia/Pacific region outside of China as well."

**HNN: You come from a diverse brand background. What are some of the takeaways you've learned about branding success that you're bringing to Hampton?**

**Buckley:** "There are a couple important elements of branding, regardless of the brand or industry. One is that you need a real, clear understanding of who your customer is. What's fascinating about the hotel industry is that you have essentially two customers—the guests staying in the hotel and the owners. First and foremost, for us to remain relevant, we have to keep our pulse on consumer trends and understanding consumer needs. Knowing your competition is also critically important. The upper midscale segment is the most competitive category. Not only is it massive, with very strong players, it is evolving and changing by the day. That's why I'm beating the drum that we can't sit still. We have to continue to be the lighthouse brand and push the envelope. The third takeaway about branding is to take calculated risks. It's really hard to be innovative and forward-thinking if you aren't willing to take calculated risks and challenges."

**HNN: What are some of your pet peeves about brands? Some mistakes you see getting made by brands around the world?**

**Buckley:** "Don't ever dismiss your competition! No matter how small or feeble or insignificant they may look right now, you have to keep an eye on them. If you don't, all of a sudden you turn around and they're right there.

"When you go back to the basics of branding and marketing, it's product, price, promotion and place. Those that start to miss out on some of those pieces are the ones that fall behind. They may focus too much on price and not enough on product. They aren't mindful of how they're promoting—or overpromoting—and all of a sudden they've turned it into a discount brand.

Keeping the balance is critical. That's where I find that when brands fail, it's usually because they missed the mark on one of those key pieces."

**HNN: What are some examples of brands that do things right, in your eyes? We hear a lot about Starbucks and Southwest Airlines as solid brand examples, but do you have others you look at?**

**Buckley:** "Lego is a great example. They're a small, family-run company more than 90 years old that at one point was in dire straits and had to reinvent themselves. I think they've done a brilliant job of going to market in a way that was very different but still core to their business and product. They started fan partnerships with Disney and Star Wars, et cetera, and now they have an endless possibility of products, but it's all built on that foundation of building.

"The second example is Amazon. They're everywhere you turn. It's incredible how they continue to innovate and push the envelope and look for new ways to serve customers and know what customers are looking for. They have expedited shipping and membership programs, which provided an added layer of income. Their customer service is outstanding, they've used technology and have built a really interesting platform.

"The third is American Express. I continue to pay those annual fees that might be higher because of the fantastic customer service. They understand how to create a strong loyalty program with benefits."