

2010 U.S. Hotel Chain Survey: Buyers Rate Crowne Plaza As King Of Upscale As Competitors Fall

By Michael B. Baker

MARCH 08, 2010 -- Travel buyers for the first time this year rated Crowne Plaza as the top upscale/select-service brand in the U.S. Hotel Chain survey, as the brand surged past its competition amid several years of expansion and multimillion-dollar renovations.



Crowne Plaza, ranked ninth out of 11 brands in the 2009 survey, earned top marks in arranging group travel, meeting facilities, corporate rate programs and food quality. The brand, part of InterContinental Hotels Group, was one of the few in any tier to hold its score steady year over year, while most other brands had a drop.

Hilton Worldwide's Hilton Garden Inn, historically a strong performer in the survey, maintained its second-place ranking from 2009, this year tying with the fast-growing Hyatt Place brand. Two other Hilton brands, Embassy Suites and Doubletree, rounded out the top five, while last year's top-rated brand, Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, dropped to sixth.

Crowne Plaza, originally launched several decades ago as the upscale version of Holiday Inn, has benefited in recent years from heavy IHG investment, said Gina LaBarre, the company's vice president of brand delivery for the Americas. It is one of the fastest-growing U.S. brands, having nearly tripled its presence in the past several years. Major renovations include the \$85 million upgrade of its flagship Times Square property in New York. "A lot of money has gone into this brand, with about half a billion dollars invested in renovation," LaBarre said.

Crowne Plaza also reorganized its sales team in late 2008. "When the bottom fell off of the market, we increased our sales force by 25 percent," LaBarre said. "We organized it so corporate accounts get one point of contact, and we've been able to deliver a better experience from a sales perspective."

Hilton Garden Inn rated the highest in four categories: arranging individual travel, staff, physical appearance and, in a tie with Hyatt Place, the overall price/value relationship. Hyatt Place, making its second survey appearance in the brand's short history, scored highest in three additional categories: the quality of in-room and business amenities and its business center.

Up from sixth place last year, Hyatt Place in only three years has grown to about 150 hotels in North America, said Gary Dollens, Hyatt's global head of franchise and select brands.

The brand grew out of Hyatt's acquisition of AmeriSuites, which gave it leverage to grow the brand quickly, but Hyatt only put its name on the AmeriSuites properties after conversions, he said.

Hyatt Place, along with extended stay brand Summerfield Suites, has given Hyatt a presence in several secondary markets where it never operated before, such as Salt Lake City and Charleston, S.C., Dollens said. As a result, "We were very gratified this year with our acceptance in the request-for-proposals process for the corporate market," he said.

Although it ranked seventh overall, Starwood Hotels & Resorts' Four Points by Sheraton brand had the highest-rated commission payment system in the tier, an honor it repeated from 2009.

Upscale occupancy this year should remain about flat, said Jan Freitag, vice president of global development for Smith Travel Research, but it's one of the fastest-growing tiers in terms of supply.

"The properties aren't that expensive and don't take that long to build when you compare it to a luxury hotel," Freitag said, "which could take five years from conception."

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