



A Conversation with James

TRANSCRIPT: Filip Boyen Tells James Berkeley Why Profitable Growth Requires Exciting Customers and Employees

Today in *A Conversation with James*, James Berkeley talked to [Filip Boyen](#) Chief Operating Officer at Orient-Express. He is navigating a famous brand with iconic properties through a challenging economy. He has needed to balance short-term business imperatives with long-term strategic objectives while keeping key constituents happy, not an easy task. We talked over lunch and in brief stops between some of the world's most desirable abodes. We talk about THE CHALLENGE OF BRINGING A COLLECTION OF ICONIC INDIVIDUAL BUSINESSES TO WORK TOWARDS A SET OF COMMON GOALS: MAXIMISE REVENUE, IMPROVE OPERATING MARGINS AND MINIMISE BUSINESS ACQUISITION EXPENSES.

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JAMES BERKELEY, HOST: Thank you for joining me today.

What piece of advice would you share about your experience over the past 12 months and how you plan to exploit that going forward?

FILIP BOYEN, COO ORIENT-EXPRESS: It is doubly important today that our staff continue to focus on how best to attract, delight and retain our hard won clientele. We achieve this through constant training and attention to quality standards, as well as creative marketing. I am pleased to report that in a recent industry Quality Assurance survey we have moved from No. 7 to No. 3 in our

memorable experiences – that takes staff commitment.

BERKELEY: Investment in your people, how big a priority is this now, say compared to 12 months ago? How does that manifest itself in your budgets and action plans over the next year?

BOYEN: James, if you are putting me on the spot I would score it an “8”, and probably this time last year a “4” out of 10. My observation: you cannot underestimate the role of “employee involvement” in tough trading conditions. Today we are directing time and money to various improvements: (1) Establishing Job Accountability Plans – success is a strong alignment between our brand checklist and standards and each individual’s objectives. (2) Growth and career development opportunities arising from new property openings. (3) A bespoke performance and talent management system.

Our mantra is that we “celebrate success”, and by that I mean “worldwide success” as an organisation. We have identified a pool of 25 middle management and executive positions, which we anticipate in two years will generate 3 to 4 General Managers and a further 12 to 14 executive team members. Adopting a centralised approach, a first for the business, will create consistency, personal accountability and loyalty in a way that never existed before. Gone are the “informal” recruitment processes. We are adopting a structure which we confidently predict will enhance our pool of internationally mobile talent within a very brief time period.

BERKELEY: The fastest, surest route to loyal and “permanent” customers and clients is with fulfilled employees offering great service. In your view where should hotel chains and property owners be directing time and money now to maximise that employee fulfilment, and *really* exploit an economic upturn?

BOYEN: An investment in services and facilities is no longer good enough. Our customers expect an emotional experience. That means having confident hoteliers who can communicate in a personalised way, deliver attentive customer service, which is original and trend breaking, and provide a meaningful experience. For Orient-Express Hotels that means investing in and supporting our people with appropriate education and training.

At Orient-Express Hotels, each customer relationship manager is individually tasked with offering other unique Orient-Express Hotels experiences, while engaging in a meaningful conversation about such things as history, culture, food and customer tastes. Success in terms of customer loyalty at Orient-Express Hotels is measured on the number of visits each client makes to any of our properties not just their own.

BERKELEY: Almost two thirds of the Top 25 hotel brands today were founded during recessionary times. Competition will become more severe for your brightest and best people. How are you prepared to handle this? Please describe the preventative action you are taking.

BOYEN: We believe that we are very well positioned. In my opinion there are four key elements: individual treatment, working environment, business opportunities and culture.

At Orient-Express Hotels today, we are rapidly increasing our investment in learning and development, every member of staff participates in a stock appreciation rights plan, and we have a competitive management incentive plan for heads of departments upwards. Together with improvements to our internal communication, leadership, career development, recognition, and ability to match their aspirations, I am confident that we can retain our brightest and best people.

BERKELEY: At Orient-Express what are your priorities to accelerate repeat business from your best customers? What impact will your people have on your success or failure?

BOYEN: Three key areas: branding, technology and meaningful conversations with our guests. We have recently completed a significant global programme with our Brand Ambassador, David Hester and the operating team in each property. The process of turning our brand values into organisational reality has elicited tremendous response from our colleagues around the world, which is an immediate “win” in terms of enhancing their commitment to the brand. There are so many great brains walking around our hotels. Technology is moving fast and we need to embrace it in all aspects of the customer experience, our colleagues’ learning and interaction. I cannot emphasise how important it is that our staff at all levels really engage with the customer, and hold meaningful conversations with each customer. Our objective is to double our repeat clientele within 3 years and accelerate the speed with which our clients take a “grand tour” of our properties.

BERKELEY: Any closing thoughts?

BOYEN: Recession focuses the mind. We have learned to tighten our belts and that process can be executed in a positive way – by involving our staff and listening to their often very creative suggestions about how we can do things better and more profitably. Because it comes from them, there is commitment to achieve it as well as real involvement.

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