

Aparium takes pride in being the 'anti-brand'

August 5 2015

Aparium is building off its "trans-local" approach perfected at the Iron Horse Hotel with a pipeline of five hotels throughout the U.S.



Aparium's next project is The Charmant Hotel, scheduled to open in 2015 in La Crosse Wisconsin. (Photo: Aparium)



Highlights

- "If you're everything to everybody, you're not really anything," Aparium's COO said.
- Aparium carves its niche in secondary Midwest markets such as La Crosse, Wisconsin.
- Leveraging local talent has played a big part in Aparium's success.

CHICAGO—The Iron Horse Hotel might not be for you, and that's just what the founders of its creator, Aparium, intended.

While other brand companies are focused on being all things to all people, the [Aparium](#) team wants to be something truly special to only some people.

"If you're everything to everybody, you're not really anything. ... I can't be passionate about being something that generally speaking is meeting everybody's needs," Kevin Robinson, the company's COO and managing partner, told Hotel News Now.

Take the Iron Horse. Opened a few years ago in a century-old warehouse in Milwaukee, the 100-room hotel has married the city's enthusiasm for beers and bikes (motorcycles, that is) with what Robinson calls "comfortable luxury." The concept has proven a hit with locals looking for something different. But it's not for everyone, he said.

"Some people come to the Iron Horse and it's not the right place," he said. "We'd love to have everybody's business, but it's OK that we're not fit for what everybody's looking for."

That philosophy will hold true in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where the Aparium team is readying the opening of the Charmant Hotel. The same is true in Minneapolis for the Hewing Hotel. And in Detroit for the Foundation.

In each and every instance, Robinson et al. are carving out the unsatisfied, untapped niches in oft-forgotten markets.

"In today's world, we have a primary focus on markets that a lot of people are not paying attention to—which are smaller markets like Milwaukee, La Crosse, Minneapolis—where typically you only get attention from the big brands that are going in and replicating things that they've done in the past without putting thought behind it," Robinson said.

"We're not a brand. We're the anti-brand," he continued. "We are creating the brand in and of itself through each product. We feel that's the most authentic and genuine way to connect with the local community."

'Trans-local hospitality'

The approach requires a razor-sharp focus on what's most relevant in a given market, Robinson said.

He calls it "trans-local hospitality."

"It's really understanding the independent markets and connecting the transient traveler to the local experience so they don't have to leave the hotel to find the newest and coolest place in the market," he explained.

Collaboration is key in the endeavor. When an opportunity presents itself—usually in the form of a local investor who wants to replicate the Iron Horse's success—Robinson and his fellow executives dive headfirst into the local market.

"We instantly become locals ourselves," he said. "We put an extensive amount of time traveling in these markets, extensive amount of (time on) market research. It's the principals spending the time in these markets."

Their goal? Find the best brewers, farmers, distributors, coffee roasters—those tastemakers who can help collaborate and bring a unique hospitality project to life.

"They live there locally and understand the markets better than we do," Robinson said. "We find out what they're doing, what's special about them—some of the well-known ones that have a larger distribution and some of the not-so-well-known ones. After we do that, we recap as a team who we can see ourselves working with and to what degree."

That's how the Aparium team found Kickapoo Coffee Roasters in La Crosse. The "farmer-focused" roaster will provide fresh coffee for guests when the Charmant opens. But only the Charmant, Robinson said. After forming that partnership, the Kickapoo team wanted to explore the potential for its grounds to be supplied throughout Aparium's fledging portfolio. Robinson resisted. A trans-local hotel requires local partners in each market, he said.

Scalable success

Though the Iron Horse is the only hotel open in the Aparium portfolio, Robinson and his co-founder Mario Tricoli are no strangers to success. The duo developed Chicago's Elysian Hotel in 2009 to much acclaim, among other projects under their respective belts. (The Elysian has since converted to the Waldorf Astoria Chicago.)

But can Aparium's bespoke approach—and accompanied success—truly scale?

Robinson thinks so.

"We're at a good place where we're all stretched thin ... but not so thin that we can't continue to focus on it," he said.

Aparium has five hotels in the pipeline scheduled to open between now and 2017. And while each aims to provide a truly unique experience for guests, the elements that drive the company's operating platform can be replicated more efficiently.

"We put together an extremely thorough and substantial operating platform," Robinson said. He has the manuals and standard operating procedures to prove it. "That's allowed us to hire people, train people and put them through the same process. There are only minor things that change in each of those properties."

Robinson doesn't have an end-game in mind. He and Tricoli will grow the company as large as they can, provided they can keep the right team in place.

"Our pace will continue," he said. "We're very well-capitalized. We can participate and assist owners with putting deals together."

The journey will keep him busy, Robinson admits. That's where he falls back on one important piece of advice gleaned in a prior life:

"You've got to be comfortable with the sand moving beneath your feet all the time."