

By **Stephanie Ricca**
EDITOR IN CHIEF

You've heard me grumble in this space about the number of hotel brands coming to market, but this month I want to talk about three new brands that really made an impact on me when I heard about them. Last month at Hotel Management's annual NATHIC conference in Chicago we held our second annual student brand competition. Teams of hospitality students from NYU, Michigan State University and DePaul University presented new brand concepts and complete business plans to judges in the "Firing Squad" competition.

The panel of judges included David Kong, CEO of Best Western International; Roger Bloss, CEO of Vantage Hospitality Group, Jerome Cataldo, CEO and president of Hostmark Hospitality Group; Bruce Haase, CEO of Value Place Franchise Services and Mukesh Mowji, CEO of Pracrea. They asked every tough question about cost per key, financing, room layout and more. And the students? They had poise and knowledge about their brands' details that rivaled teams I have seen launch "real" brands from multinational companies.

But let's talk about their brand concepts, because slick video alone cannot cover up a poor idea. All three shared similarities—tech accessibility, mobile-friendly services and a focus on local elements. But each brand had at least one touch that made the audience say, hmm, why haven't we tried that before?

For the NYU team and its concept, MW Hotels, that element was the brand's focus on sports fans and the group's plan to draw guests and locals to locally immersive revenue-generating spaces. The DePaul team presented Altru Hotels, with the tagline of "Stay well. Do good." Their concept focused on corporate social responsibility, and this brand's aha moment was its partnership with Habitat for Humanity. Defending champs (and winners once again) MSU presented an economy concept called Nomad Hotels that is designed to appeal to the adventure- and budget-minded traveler. MSU's aha moment: Modular construction and efficiently designed rooms.

The best part of this contest (and you'll be able to see video at www.HotelManagement.net) was seeing true brainstorming at work. These students weren't representing a parent company signing their paycheck or a board of directors hungry for returns. They were simply using resources to come up with the best ideas. How breathtakingly simple and effective. Have a wonderful holiday season and happy new year! **HM**

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➔ INSIDE THIS SPECIAL ADVISOR ISSUE

PURCHASING

8 Purchasing companies survey

DESIGN

14 Design firms survey

BROKERS

24 Hotel brokers survey

BRANDS

30 Hotel brands survey

OWNERS

42 Multiunit owners & developers survey

CONSTRUCTION

52 Construction companies survey

LENDING

58 Lenders spot future trends

MANAGEMENT

62 Third-party management companies survey

HOSPITALITY SCHOOLS

74 Hospitality schools survey

INDEX

78 Ad index and marketplace



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