Tales from the Envirohood

This is the first of what we envision will soon be a regular column dedicated to the sustainable issues relevant to our hospitality industry. It seemed perfectly appropriate this first column to start with something that we must begin to understand in more depth: sustainability.

The myriad of definitions of the term are all variations of the theme of not compromising future generations with our current actions. Okay that is broad, I admit, but it is the essence of the term. Nowadays we hear about the triple bottom line and environmental ethics and sustainable certifications. Still, it doesn't change a thing about sustainability. If our products, actions or associations compromise the ability of future generations to have the same natural experience on Earth as we have had then we may not be sustainable.

Hmmm, doesn't that indict all of us? Yes, to a degree. As a result, we all collectively need to be paying better attention. As many of you have heard me say in the past, here we are conducting this never-before attempted lab experiment on the only planet we call home by altering its chemical balance and we still are debating whether a customer will accept a surcharge for converting a hotel to a percentage clean energy? Well I guess I would pay for staying at a hotel or eating at a restaurant that isn't contributing to my descendants' demise, wouldn't you? Don't feel guilty. Sustainability is compromised by many factors. Population growth in developing nations is as much a factor as recycling rates in America. Agricultural conversion of rainforest in the Amazon is as much of a factor as melting ice sheets in Greenland. But with this knowledge that sustainability is a global issue, do we have a specific responsibility to be sustainable in the U.S.? Yes! Yes, incontrovertibly, and forever. According to the Travel Industry Association, domestic and international travelers spent 700 billion dollars in the U.S. in 2006. This produced 178 billion dollars in payroll income. Sustainability means balancing that economic gain with strict environmental standards and a commitment to social responsibility. After acknowledging that, we can finally get somewhere. Sustainability is all about achieving a balance. Can products be sustainable? Can companies be sustainable? Can people be sustainable? If we recognize that we have to achieve a balance with the personal and business lives we lead, we can then approach sustainability with all of these areas. Consequently, the recognition of this allows us to be discerning with the information that is being marketed. Unless your company's primary focus is preserving the biological hotspots of the world, you probably shouldn't be promoting your company as "totally green." Unless your company is a non-profit with 100% of its earnings going to support a people in crisis, you shouldn't be marketing your "total commitment to sustainability."

Now, mind you, I am all for sustainable improvements and the steps toward achieving a balance but let's be clear about the concept of sustainability, and let's stop using the term so nonchalantly.   Once we truly grasp its meaning, we will find it is the most difficult challenge of our times.