



The Prism Partnership

Top executives who've been there and done that for THISCO/Pegasus, Starwood, ITT Sheraton and Carlson create a new breed of consultant.

consultants who walk the walk

By Mary Pat Sullivan

Not Your Typical Consulting Group

In 2001, industry veteran Bill Watson identified a gap in the consulting services available to the travel and hospitality industry. “The choice was either giant, global consulting groups, or smaller companies offering syndicated analysis and reports or sole practitioners focused on a particular area,” he said. “Not every client needed a McKinsey or Gartner and most clients have needs beyond the capabilities of any one-man shop.” Watson, with co-founders Gary Leopold and Mark Haley, set out to address that need, launching the consulting enterprise known today as The Prism Partnership.

Prism brought together deep and broad expertise in most areas of the travel, leisure and hospitality industries including marketing, planning, research, technology and operations. This expertise comes together daily to provide a complete approach to business and, ultimately, to benefit each Prism client.

The Need For Trusted Advisors

Every company, especially a successful one, recognizes the need for trusted advisors to provide objective strategic assistance during points of corporate transition. So, when Harley-Davidson Motor Company decided to extend its brand into the travel and leisure category, The Prism Partnership was hired.

“A key factor was really the breadth of knowledge of the Prism team. They offer a great ability to research and fact find. They have a great understanding of technology in the travel industry and



O'Hanlon and Watson strategizing with Haley.

they have an incredible grasp of how travel got where it is today,” said Scott Habegger, Director of Demand Chain Integration and Performance Consulting for Harley. “Because at Harley-Davidson our brand is so important and dear to us, we really felt this firm offered us the best balance of research, technology, innovation and marketing.”

The folks at Harley know their customers very well. What they didn't know were the points of intersection between their loyal customers and the travel industry and travel products. Prism created their travel industry roadmap.

Partnering with ISM, a boutique advertising agency known for its work in the travel industry, Prism helped

identify aspects of each client's business model, which were then used in their marketing and advertising plans. “Companies seek out advertising or marketing specialists to solve what is often a product, operational, technological or business process problem,” said Prism partner, and ISM President and CEO, Gary Leopold.

Rather than adopt challenges that advertising might not fix, Leopold decided to find a better solution. Stemming from his desire to keep advertising pure to its purpose and to satisfy a need he saw unfulfilled at many competitive agencies, Leopold sought an alliance with Watson and The Prism Partnership. “Our customers need to understand their product and their customer, long before they come to us for advertising. A world-class creative wrapper does not fix an internal operational problem. We can really strategize the business through Prism.”

A Temporary Brain Trust

The Prism Partnership offers a temporary brain trust for clients seeking optimal solutions for their needs. In addition to research, marketing and technology, Prism also offers expertise in strategic planning and a history of corporate success.

Prism counts itself among the major consulting firms, but prides itself on taking a more pragmatic and practical approach to working with clients—analyzing the problem, recommending solutions and helping to implement the changes. “If other consulting firms chose to implement the recommendations in their reports, their documents would be a lot thinner,” said Leopold. “It doesn't matter how big a firm you hire, three or four people will be working on your account. It still comes down to who touches your business.”

For Sabre Holdings, tapping Prism's expertise to map out a complete landscape of the hotel industry made their assignment a success. “I think what Prism was able to do for us was to quickly assemble their team, at a reasonable cost, to examine the hospitality space for us,” said Scott Alvis, Senior Vice President of Enterprise Marketing for Sabre Holdings.

For the project, Prism partners participated in Sabre planning groups, becoming an active part of the organization and helping to overlay outside facets of the hospitality industry with Sabre's internal business plan. The partners' individual backgrounds and insights provided a complete view of the hotel industry. “They were very flexible and

thorough in their approach and research. Bill and the team were very responsive and easy to work with. The final product was comprehensive and met our specific need.”

Meeting needs and solving problems remains a driving force behind Prism’s success. Watson’s list of professional achievements spans nearly every segment of the travel and tourism industry. He has worked with the airline industry, co-founded THISCO/Pegasus, drove the development of two global CRS systems, led the creation of a new brand identity shift at Best Western and the original development of the Sheraton (now Starwood) Guest Loyalty Program. He is currently on the board of directors for Micros Systems and TLX, Inc. and has held board seats on Signature Inns and Passkey International, Inc.

The Making of the Partnership

Although formally creating a company in 2001, the Prism partners have worked together in various capacities for nearly 20 years. Their history is apparent in their mutual respect for each other’s time, talents and impact throughout the industry. “Prism is made up of people who are not just in the business, but have truly shaped and continue to help shape the business,” said Watson.

Contributing to this effort are Watson as managing partner, Mark Haley heading the technology practice, Elaine Hendricks leading research, Maureen O’Hanlon focusing on strategic marketing and CRM and Maureen Lester managing database marketing and sales.

For Leopold, who has influenced the brand images for clients including Four Seasons, Sonesta Hotels, Barbados, The Bahamas and Emirates, the novelty of consultant work and the chance to work with the members of Prism are the best parts of Prism. “This is really an interesting group which came together at the right time and moment in their careers. Smart, talented, committed. Honest with

For real estate client RE/MAX, retaining Prism for business analysis and solutions has become part of the plan. “We have been in a relationship with The Prism Partnership since its inception. During that time, we have utilized their services many times over,” said Jeff Camp, Director of Marketing for RE/MAX of California and Hawaii. “Time and again, they took that extra step to learn about our business and our needs. When we couldn’t identify or put into stone precisely what we were looking for, The Prism Partnership arrived at the final point precisely. They asked intelligent questions and offered helpful advice when structuring our research.”

The Customer Relationship

Many of Prism’s assignments involve Customer Relationship Management (CRM), an area of familiarity for many of the partners. Knowing the customer is absolutely the difference, according to O’Hanlon. “When you innovate, it is hard not to be copied. Get to know your customer and your efforts can’t be duplicated because they center around your customer’s specific needs. Story by story you get to know each client, and then you institutionalize your learnings. It’s easy to say, ‘Put your customer in the center of your business.’ It is more difficult to do that, knowing that it will affect the way you work.”

O’Hanlon comes from the marketing world, having served as Vice President of Worldwide Marketing and Sales for Radisson Hotels and Resorts. O’Hanlon’s industry honors include four consecutive years being named one of the most powerful women in the American travel industry by *Travel Agent* magazine; being recognized as one of the 25 most influential industry executives by *Tour & Travel News*; and receiving numerous other citations and accolades. She currently serves as Chairman of the Board for Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International

“A key factor was really the breadth of knowledge of the Prism team. They offer a great ability to research and fact find. They have a great understanding of technology in the travel industry and they have an incredible grasp of how travel got where it is today,” says Habegger of Harley-Davidson.

every client. We all come out of corporate environments. We understand that dynamic, but at Prism, we are not encumbered by politics or layers of management.”

Watson sees Prism’s objectivity, its ability to look at a company from every angle, as the company’s best asset. “We get a sense of all aspects of a company and its goals, such as the dynamics of a service industry product, understanding the lifestyle segment, analyzing customer loyalty and truly managing the content and value of customer relationship management. We don’t walk in with a preconceived solution, specific product or a piece of software. We walk in with very open minds and bring our experience and expertise to start the analytical process.”

(HSMIAI) and Vice Chairman of the HSMIAI Foundation, its research and education arm.

“Sometimes it is a consultant’s role to get in the way of the client,” said O’Hanlon. “During my time at Carlson [Marketing], sometimes I was too close to see what needed to be done. The travel industry tends to create lifers in many companies. Spending a long time in a company engenders loyalty, but sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know. You need fresh eyes to come up with things you might not think of otherwise. You can bring in our temporary talent. We don’t think exactly like you do. We will infuse and challenge you to get out of your own way for a minute.”

Recognizing pitfalls and potential problems within a project is another benefit to working with Prism. “Quite often, a company doesn’t think through the operational impacts. We have all lived through that in our own careers. Often the anticipated solution is really more like an iceberg. Everything is hidden underneath. We’ve seen the icebergs and overcome them. Implementing a loyalty program, for example, requires marketing, reservation interface, launch activities, implementation plans, training and ongoing support. We’ll help identify the roadmap for those changes,” Watson said.

The Intersection of Marketing and Technology

What makes this group different? “We operate at the intersection of marketing and technology,” said partner Mark Haley. “We can help a customer understand what the best technological solution might be and also how to get the absolute most from that solution by adjusting business processes and existing technology.”

Haley’s background includes 14 years of technology and operations experience with ITT Sheraton Hotels, where he was Divisional Technology Executive for the North American Division. He is a member of Hospitality Financial Technology Professionals (HFTP) and serves on committees for the Hospitality Industry Technology Exposition & Conference (HITEC) and the American Hotel and Lodging Association Technology Committee.

In some cases, Prism has walked away from a potential client rather than provide the wrong solution. Customers think they need a new technological tool, but what they really need is to understand how to use the tools in place. “I have had to say to customers, if you can’t make the system you have today work, then your problem may not be the system,” said Haley. “Consultants that also sell hardware and software products are often solving the wrong problem, trying to fit their product in as the solution.”

Consulting is often viewed simply as a cost to company executives. “We all came out of the corporate environment. We all understand budget constraints,” said partner Elaine Hendricks. And research, her specialty, is often one of those items in the budget cut line. “My goal is to find the least amount I can spend to accurately answer the client’s business questions. That’s a win on two fronts.”

Hendricks has an extensive, 20-year history in the travel industry, with nearly three-quarters of her career spent in research and strategic marketing. She built her reputation on developing custom research—approaches that deliver relevant and actionable results. She has ample experience in qualitative and quantitative research on issues such as brand image positioning, ad campaign development, new product and program development, price elasticity, customer satisfaction and performance measurement, tracking and forecasting.

Saving money while maintaining quality research is Hendricks’ mission. “My best business success was helping a client save several hundred thousand dollars of investment in a new program the company had developed, which research showed would have failed if launched as conceived. As a result of the research, the program was

completely redesigned and successfully received in the marketplace,” she said.

When Prism was hired to assist the Orange County Visioning Project, the team delivered a platform from which a clear brand emerged. “The Prism Partnership assisted the Orange County Visioning Project with very thorough and appropriate research as a meaningful contribution to the County Branding Initiative. The research work was right on target with our needs, setting a platform for the agency to do their work on brand positioning. Their work was very highly regarded by county travel professionals not only involved with the County Branding Initiative, but those generally associated with our business that had access to the final data,” said Ned Snavely, General Manager of the Aliso Creek Inn.

The Prism Partnership encompasses an extensive range of skill and talent. Each project is touched by several members of the team, and, in some cases, all of the partners. “Joining The Prism Partnership was as much about the people as it was the projects and clients,” said Maureen Lester. “We work well together, have the same work ethics and strive to deliver the best solutions possible. And that comes across to our customers.” Lester joined the group in 2004, bringing more than 18 years of sales and marketing experience, domestically and internationally. Her extensive CRM experience at Starwood Hotels and Resorts and database marketing experience at Student Advantage have equipped Lester with a broad range of unique capabilities.

The Right Clients

To date, The Prism Partnership has successfully assisted premier hotel chains, destination organizations, individual properties, global distribution companies and, oh yes, the leader of the motorcycle world.

This high-energy group continues to seek clients who want more than the traditional consultant group. They are seeking clients who want partners in finding and initiating business solutions. They seek opportunities to help smart companies do smart business even better, using research, marketing and technology to find the answers.✚

About the author: Mary Pat Sullivan, CTC, is a career travel industry journalist, spending 15 years as a reporter, editor and publisher for a group of travel trade publications before starting her own consulting business.

PRISM AT A GLANCE

Address: 745 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116

Specialty: Travel & Leisure Consulting

Primary Contacts:

Bill Watson, Managing Partner bwatson@theprismpartnership.com

Maureen O’Hanlon, Partner mohanlon@theprismpartnership.com

Gary Leopold, President/CEO, ISM gleopold@ismboston.com

Telephone: 617.424.3152 Fax: 617.266.1890

Web site: www.theprismpartnership.com