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## Corporate Entrepreneur Interview Series—Alexandra Jaritz on launching Tru by Hilton



Alexandra Jaritz, a Brand Strategy and Marketing Executive for Hilton, pioneered the design and launch of Hilton's latest hotel brand *Tru by Hilton*. We spoke to her about the journey she went on and challenges the team overcame to bring the new hotel concept to market.

### **DC: How did the idea for Tru by Hilton come about?**

*AJ: At Hilton, we pride ourselves on growing organically. The Hampton brand when it was first launched over thirty years ago was originally positioned to be a midscale brand. Over time we saw that the brand had grown into the upper midscale segment, creating a gap in our portfolio. We also saw that there was a far bigger opportunity to capture emerging travelers and provide our HHonors members with a product at a lower price point. We knew that there was an opportunity to engage emerging travelers who could mature into other Hilton brands over time, as they gain purchasing power. In order to capture them, we needed to create a game-changing product that would offer simplified yet spirited hotel experiences that are consistently delivered in a fresh and affordable way.*

**DC: How did the initial insight shape the concept?**

*AJ: Rather than focus on a target defined by age, we wanted to capture a broader audience. Extensive research helped us identify that our target consumers spanned generations and share a “zest for life” mindset, whether they are Millennials, GenXers, or Boomers. What that really means is that these consumers have a desire for human connection and want more than just a place to rest their heads; they want to be able to connect with other travelers. Additionally, until now, consumers have had to sacrifice a consistent, quality experience for an affordable price. Tru by Hilton puts an end to that compromise.*

*In order to do that, we generated ideas that deliver against these insights and developed a product that would reflect changing traveler needs. So, for example, we made the rooms smaller because people spend more time in the lobby where they’re looking for a more social experience. Our lobby allows guests to customize their experience, whether they want to connect with other travelers or need a quiet place to work, read or watch others interact. To make the small guestroom work, we kept things minimal but meaningful—a great bed, shower-only bathrooms, huge windows with lots of natural light, lots of lighting, superfast WiFi and a 55" inch TV. We felt like we should focus on the things our target customer group cared about, and do it in a really fresh, fun, forward-looking way.*

**DC: How did you involve customers in the design process?**

*AJ: We surveyed 10,000 consumers about different elements, such as the design and product experiences. The first thing we did was start visualizing ideas before taking renderings to guests and owners and asking what they thought. Then with our architecture design firm, we built out what a 231 square foot room would feel like. After moving around the space we made some adjustments to the concept and features. Next, we built a room entirely out of cardboard enabling us to walk our owners and target guests through it and to get more input and make changes where needed.*

*We’ve conducted eight rounds of consumer testing with about 4,000 of our target consumers in the Tru by Hilton model, testing every aspect of our lobby. In this model we had the real items, colors and furniture—it was almost 98% to spec. It looked fantastic. And even after we launched the brand in January 2016, we have continued to bring in consumers to the test space to make sure we have the pulse of our target guest.*

**DC: What are some of the challenges you overcame in the process?**

*AJ: One of our big challenges is maintaining focus after launch. Sometimes I think we’re a victim of our own success in that once you get past the launch event people think all the hard work is over. The truth is though that’s where things get really tough. So for us the onus is on the leadership team to continue to emphasize that there’s a long way to go and that we need to focus on the details. I like to remind people that “we haven’t actually opened a hotel yet!”*

**DC: Following launch, how long before an actual Tru by Hilton hotel is open for business?**

*AJ: We launched in January 2016, had our first ground break in March, and are expecting our first hotel to open in March of 2017. Our goal is to condense the time from ground break to opening even further. To make that a reality, we’ve worked with a lean team and have had to be really buttoned up on everything from product specifications, type of furniture, manufacturers, pricing, etc. Everything has to be solid to*

*facilitate replicating over a lot of buildings very quickly. Our senior leadership has also given us the support and mandate to make big decisions quickly, which has helped us accelerate the process.*

**DC: What advice would you give someone that was in your shoes at the start of the process?**

*AJ: I would say that it's important to realize that there will be challenges and there will be days where you may question what you're doing. But I feel that that is a critical part of the process to success. You get to a point where you're like, "I can't do this anymore." But it's ultimately worth it because I feel like all of those things that we ran up against made us stronger as a team, made the brand better or made us course correct in ways that made the product better. So maintaining your focus and vision and learning from feedback has been critical to creating a better quality output.*

**DC: Is there a company that has inspired you from an innovation perspective?**

*AJ: There's one company I find really interesting called Orange Theory. It is a phenomenal success story! They have found a niche by offering a fitness studio that focuses on using data to help customers hit their personal fitness targets. The point being it's such a compelling value proposition and it's great branding and they have grown like crazy, but they've done it in a such a simple way. I think it's really inspiring.*

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