

COMMENTARY

Tennis And Luxury Hotels: A Perfect Match

by [Harvey Chipkin](#), Columnist, Yesterday

On successive nights during the week leading up to the U.S. Open tennis championships at Flushing Meadows in New York, a major hotel company and a luxury New York hotel hosted lavish media/client events that featured high-profile current and former tennis champions.

It's nothing new for brands to affiliate with non-related products, but the choice of those partners is important. Clearly, tennis is associated with luxury. It could be the celebrities that show up at matches or the lifestyles of the players themselves. Whatever the connection, these hospitality companies are willing to invest substantially in the relationship.

One of the events was a badminton -- yes, badminton -- match in the courtyard of the Lotte New York Palace Hotel across the street from St. Patrick's Cathedral, featuring the very best-known players on the tour, including the Williams Sisters, Rafael Nadal and the 15-year old phenom Coco Gauff.

Becky Hubbard, the hotel's general manager, said it's able to produce the event (this was the fifth annual) because of its partnership with AYS World, a sports marketing and event management company. It's a way, she said, for players "to have a light and entertaining night" before the Open begins.

And, as with any good marketing program, there is more to it than the one night. At another time and place, the hotel's chef partnered with Serena Williams in a cook-off competition against Venus Williams.

These events illustrate the hotels's aim to give guests one-of-a-kind experiences, which are called "Only at the Palace." They have included a magic show, "Gossip Girl" tours, and a Letters to Santa event.

The other tennis-centric event was at the Kimpton Hotel Eventi in Manhattan, produced by InterContinental Hotels Group (which owns Kimpton). The company was long known for such mid-rate brands as Holiday Inn and is now moving broadly into the luxury space with InterContinental, Kimpton and most recently Six Senses, a very high-end hotel and resort operator. This was a big party with highlights like former champion Andy Roddick playing ping pong and multiple tennis themes.

Brian McGuinness, senior vice president of global guest experience, said that with the company positioning itself in the luxury category, this initiative was part of an overall effort "to lean into partnerships that drive guest experiences." It also aimed to deliver the message that guests at any IHG brand can redeem loyalty rewards points at the luxury properties.

The IHG relationship with tennis extends well beyond the one night. The company signed up for a five-year deal with the USTA not just as the official hotel partner but as the hotel loyalty partner as well. It is making efforts to promote the one-of-a-kind tennis experiences it's offering to its top customers and clients, which include a tennis clinic with Roddick at Flushing Meadows.

By integrating all brands from Holiday Inn Express to the flagship InterContinental into the scheme, the company is "really starting to tie all our brands together," said McGuinness, speeding up growth across all markets.

Anybody who watched the U.S. Open matches would have noticed the Mercedes-Benz logo on the nets -- a clear illustration of that luxury brand's belief that tennis targets the right demographic. Any hospitality brand targeting high-end customers would be happy to be in the company not just of great tennis players but of a legendary auto maker.