

The Chameleon In Us All - By J. Ragsdale Hendrie

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Sometimes we must look to nature to appreciate not only the dilemma but also the response to the 'Green' Movement in Hospitality. Some are confused, our Guests, Visitors and Patrons are often flummoxed, and the easiest strategy is to do nothing.

The Old World lizard, the Chameleon, has some interesting traits, which pertain to our state of stagnation. Their eyes move independent of each other, much like we roll ours with all the conflicting information in the marketplace. They have a long, agile tongue to zap their prey, we use ours to lash out at pundits, politicians and pretenders. But, the Chameleon's most enduring trait is the ability to change skin color rapidly, reflecting their environment. They can become a shade of green, brown, gray, even red. They adapt, they survive in an adversarial world.

Another definition of Chameleon, moving from the reptilian to the human domain, is a changeable or fickle person. Many of us fall in the latter category - fickle, awaiting to be moved one way or another, as the market forces - governments, activists, scientists, and fools- all vie for our attention. Others of us have made our decisions, understanding that whether you believe or not the volumes of information and debates about the changing global environment, we need to act, change behaviors, preserve depleted resources, and drastically reduce global warming. We make the choice between being a wastrel or steward.

The word 'Green' has become demonized, unfortunately. Once the purview of the 'Tree Huggers' and environmentalists, 'Green' has become political, which always clouds any issue. Perhaps, we should rename the movement 'War on Waste'. The term 'War' always evokes emotions. We can arm those global troops with microscopes, weather balloons, solar panels, and alternative fuels.

Behaviors must change, and we, as Hospitality people and global citizens, must adapt. Wageningen University in the Netherlands undertook quite an experiment regarding behavior, through a Research Restaurant on Campus. They were studying what, why and how people eat, drink and dine. They are looking at colors, smells, sounds - sensory stimulants which influence our habits. But, the most alarming figure released with this initiative was that one third of all foods is thrown out in the Netherlands. That is staggering, and the figure is probably consistent with other developed nations. It certainly trumps your Mother's warning about eating everything on your plate, for children are starving in Asia and Africa (true, then and now). Look within your own kitchens. Wastrel begins to ring true.

Hospitality is at quite a crossroads. We lodge, feed and entertain the world. Yet, we do not even have generally accepted Quality Standards. A sheet may be clean, but what about those holes, stains, and rips? We do not have universal Hospitality Standards. In the United States, AAA once had the market. Now, the competition is enormous, with other Rating Services galore, the Internet Booking Engines and their evaluations, and, of course, the Social commentary, which is becoming even more the decision point for a reservation. Green Certification enters this very busy traffic grid.

As Stewards and good business people we want to run an environmentally sound enterprise, and we want to market our achievements to a knowing, caring Consumer. Building, renovating and operating a 'Green' sensitive business, which is sustainable and profitable, is within our grasp. The supplier side of the equation is present with innovative, cost-effective techniques, services and products. The Consumer side, your Guest, Visitor and Patron, is also on-board. They are knowledgeable and want you to succeed, if you are worthy. But, just like the global miasma we face for universal Quality and Hospitality Standards, the 'Green' movement must become distinctive and authoritative in the Marketplace, recognizing achievement towards 'Green' goals. This does go beyond a linen reuse program and a sign, 'turn the lights off', when you leave a room.

We, Hospitality, must take the lead, before our hands become tied through well-meaning legislation or arbitrary guidelines. We know the Process to becoming a fully fledged 'Green' business takes some time, for we must garner all our resources - financial, human capital, machinery and methods - to plan our commitment and progress, almost a PERT chart. We know we may not be able to paint the entire building at one time or convert our air conditioning in one fell swoop. But, we can lay out a path, pledging benchmarks, matching our resources to timetables. We know the categories which must be addressed: air, water, energy, solid waste, toxic and hazardous waste and a communication and education plan. Within each, there are critical components, as well, which must be addressed. Every business has probably made some strides in each of the above categories, and this demonstrated progress must be certified and presented to the Public. That is how you move forward - sustainable, verifiable, credible - and then marketable.

Back to our friend, the Chameleon. Lizards have survived quite well, smiting those other insects which are so bothersome and becoming quite the Destination delight in the Galapagos Islands. Their marvel is their adaptability. We have the same opportunity, and, actually, the obligation for a leadership role.

Shall it be Steward or Wastrel?

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