

Five-star Service

Russell & Russell tap resources, global experience for hospitality clients

BY ZANDRA WOLFGRAM

The Emerald Coast may be a thriving tourist destination, but a tour along Highway 98 does not include many full-service brand hotels ... yet. Business partners and luxury-brand hoteliers John Russell and Scott Russell hope to have a (white-gloved) hand in shaping the future of hospitality in the area. And for these hotel industry veterans, the future is now.

"The hotel market is underserved here, and we think that's going to change. We would be well positioned to be on the ground with our background in the industry to assist those new developments," John Russell says. "We can ensure those operations have success, and therefore those visitors have a great experience, which brings even more business to the area," Scott Russell adds.

John, 56, and Scott, 51, founded their Emerald Coast-based hospitality management company, Russell & Russell, in March 2012. The former executives of Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort are not related, but after working together on and off for 15 years the congenial colleagues are as close as brothers. A tag-team approach to their consulting businesses allows each to make good use of their measurable hotel experience gained from 30-year careers highlighted by leadership roles at Ritz-Carlton. John tackles property management operation issues and number crunching, while Scott primarily focuses on building integrated sales and marketing strategies and mapping out the resources needed to deploy them.

For clients like Keith Howard, president and chief executive officer of the Howard Group, which owns and operates both the Courtyard by Marriott Sandestin and Residence Inn by Marriott Sandestin at Grand Boulevard, a firm like Russell & Russell elevates the entire destination. "John and Scott give us a much higher level of experience in the hospitality area. To have them come here with their Ritz-Carlton experience isn't something we were attracting even a few years ago. There is a lot of opportunity in and outside of this market for them, and we are thrilled they have offices right here in Grand Boulevard and look forward to watching them grow."

The "If You Build It They Will Come" mentality is one neither Russell subscribes to. Keeping a hotel full calls for hands-on professionals with five-star experience. "Sure anyone can open a hotel and have success, but not many know how to create a culture of service to compete at

the highest levels ... that's where we can be of service," John offers. "You have to understand both the customer and the market, and that we do."

They also understand that "who you know" can literally open doors, putting a start-up business on the fast track. "I feel the biggest asset anyone has is their circle of influence," Scott says. "I was able to maintain a very strong circle of influence nationally, so when word got out that I was forming my own company, work followed."

The word definitely got to Kate Harth, senior vice president of sales and revenue management for Morgan's Hotel Group based in New York. Harth has known Scott Russell for more than 10 years. And when this hotel heavy hitter needed a "deep dive" look at the ROI (return on investment) for her global sales organization, she says there was only one person in her Rolodex she trusted for the task. "I have been in this business for 25 years, so I could have called a lot of people. I called Scott, because I knew I would get results, communication and candor," she says.

Beyond the bottom line there is one particular intangible highly valued by hotel executives such as Harth: the human element. "We have a great relationship; Scott is able to be an extension of our team. He is able to wear the Morgan's Hotel group hat, because he knows the business," Harth says.

Making a human connection is what attracted both Scott and John to hospitality careers. Interestingly, but maybe not surprisingly, it was a false start for both of them. For Scott, working in personnel became way too personal, leading to sleepless nights over fellow employee issues. He tried on sales and found a better fit. He also found success; quickly moving up through the ranks of Ritz-Carlton to an executive role responsible for sales and training worldwide.

For hands-on John, the "desk job" kept him from the very folks he wanted to relate to. He found more sure footing to his career path after landing a spot in the esteemed Hyatt Hotels Management Training Program. It clearly suited

him. Out of a 275-member class, he was the first to be promoted to general manager. It was a role he served in eight of the 19 hotels he worked in during his three-decade career, which took him to Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Savannah (twice), New York City and even a few plum overseas spots such as Bali, where he first met Scott, who was vacationing at the Ritz-Carlton there.

"THEY PLAY OFF OF EACH OTHER WELL. SCOTT SELLS THE DREAM, AND JOHN WORKS THE NIGHTMARE." MATT LINDLEY, MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT FOR SANTA ROSA GOLF & BEACH CLUB



WHITE-GLOVED TAG TEAM
Scott Russell (left) and John Russell, shown at Vue on 30A in Santa Rosa Beach, combine experience from their 30-year careers to create a "culture of service to compete at the highest levels."

NOW...

YOU CAN AFFORD
the 30A Lifestyle...

TREE TOPS

Announcing the release of brand new
single family homes in TreeTops.



3 BEDROOM, 2.5 BATH
BEACH HOMES
W/LOT STARTING AT

\$399,900

- Gated Community off 30A
- Situated Between:
Rosemary, Alys, Seacrest Beach
- Private Pool
- Deeded Beach Access
- Surrounded by State Conservation



CONTACT
Jason Naumann

(850) 933-0328

Though travel is a true passion for Scott, this globetrotter admits one of the attractions to relocate to the Emerald Coast was the opportunity to decrease his time on the road and increase time with his family, who lives in Baton Rouge. Still, he is grateful for the career opportunities that have exposed him to diverse world cultures and shaped him into a forward thinker. "When you are trained in a corporate culture, you are not worried about today, you are thinking about the years ahead. And that is still what drives me and gives me the impetus to stay ahead," Scott explains. "If we are not on top of what's going in our industry, we don't have value for our customers."

Russell & Russell is clearly focused on what business owners value most: results. Since forming in March 2012, the duo claim all of their clients have enjoyed double-digit revenue increases. On their satisfied local client list is Matt Lindley, a management consultant for Santa Rosa Golf & Beach Club, who hired Russell & Russell to rebrand and market the Club last summer. "The creative is fresh and different, but still applicable to the brand of the club. We got a great return on all of our promotions and ad placements, and we are up 45 percent in revenue, so the numbers speak for themselves," Lindley says.

Positive ledgers also speak to a seamless partnership, which Lindley sums up this way: "They play off of each other well. Scott sells the dream, and John works the nightmare."

Though single minded in their business goals, the two friends with the same last name are distinctly different. John is an avid reader and sports-

**"A BRAND IS
A PROMISE.
I BELIEVE
EVERYTHING
YOU DO BOILS
BACK TO YOUR
BRAND, AND
IF YOU TRULY
UNDERSTAND
THE IMPORTANCE
OF BRANDING,
YOU'RE GOING TO
BE SUCCESSFUL."
SCOTT RUSSELL**

minded Midwesterner, who lives to work but is happy to hunker down at home with his wife and dogs. Scott, on the other hand, is a party-giver and musical theater junkie who bought a second house to hold his frequent family visitors. He works to live. Both share a passion for great hotels, good wine and being engaged in the community, including work with the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation, which John serves as president.

The stakes are high for any new start-up business, but for John — an ardent student of author/speaker Steven Covey — it's all in how you approach a challenge that defines a com-

pany's culture. "There is a difference between stress and pressure. Stress is a negative, and pressure is a positive. I always saw my role to de-stress an environment, but to keep pressure on," he says.

For Scott, the core of any successful individual or company comes down to one thing: branding. "A brand is a promise. I believe everything you do boils back to your brand, and if you truly understand the importance of branding, you're going to be successful."

To ensure success for Russell & Russell, John will employ his favorite adage: "Sign your work." For this self-described workaholic, when you work, you should work hard, work smart and have pride in what you do. "We're going to give all we have, and at the end of it we're going to feel good about it because it's going to be good enough for our signature." ■