

Jeff Coy and Bill Haralson Find a Way to Get Waterparks Flowing at Hotels and Resorts

*By Mike Dougherty, Post-Bulletin, Rochester, Minn.
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Apr. 25, 2004 - **Jeff Coy** spends his days and thousands of miles of travel analyzing information, talking to people and looking at many factors to determine whether the water will flow profitably at a hotel or resort indoor waterpark.

So it was with a touch of irony and some chuckles from Coy, a Rochester-based hospitality consultant, that he arrived back at his southwest Rochester home from days of travel only to find that his water well pump was broken.

"I don't have any water," he said.

But that's not a problem for hotels. Many are finding, with the assistance of Coy and his business partner **Bill Haralson**, a way to get waterparks flowing at hotels and resorts. Most of their clients are in the northern climate, but Coy is predicting that this trend will move south from its birthplace in the Wisconsin Dells.

Last fall, Coy found that 62 hotels in the United States were operating indoor waterparks, with two-thirds located in Wisconsin (28) or Minnesota (14). That number is expected to grow quickly in the next few years.

The road Coy finds himself on today began in Boston in the early 1970s as he was wrapping up his stint in the U.S. Air Force and returning to Boston University to complete his master's degree. He initially began work at a mortgage insurance company, but as the energy crisis gripped the country, he packed his family in the car, hitched a U-Haul and headed west to Phoenix.

"I sat on the doorstep of the Ramada Inn headquarters until they hired me," Coy said. "It was a gamble, but I thought I could do a good job."

His first assignment was to help cooperative marketing groups among the Ramada properties in each region of the country deal with the impact of the energy crisis, which was putting a pinch on the travel plans of Americans.

"It was at that time that I started to realize how an event halfway around the world could affect my hotel in my neighborhood," Coy said. "It brought us back to the basics."

Coy, a Michigan native, continued with Ramada and developed other marketing programs. He also worked with travel industry groups worldwide.

But one piece was missing. Coy had started at the macro-level of the industry, but he didn't have experience at the other end -- an individual hotel or resort. So he joined the Carefree Inn Resort north of Scottsdale, Ariz., as director of marketing. After a year there, he noted that Bob Walker had been hired as the new leader of the Kahler Corp. in Rochester. He sought him out for a job.

"One of the things I learned along the way is that, if you can, pick the boss you want to work for," Coy said. "That's what I did with Bob Walker."

He came to Rochester in 1982 and stayed with Kahler through 1986. As leadership changed at Kahler, Coy saw it as a time to move into his own business and put his knowledge and experience to work for hotels and resorts worldwide.

The first year was successful, with Coy making more than he had in any previous job. But years two, three and four were more difficult for his company, JLC Marketing, which is now **JLC Hospitality Consulting, Inc.**

"I realized that I had this experience, but I didn't know everything about how to start a company and market it as a product," Coy said. "The problem is that every unemployed hotel G.M. (hotel general manager) is a 'consultant.'"

Coy helped establish the International Society of Hospitality Consultants. It helps consultants with issues ranging from topical information to a code of ethics, standards and proprietary information. He's written two books on hotel marketing and developed seminars from the work.

Life was moving along well, and then shortly before Sept. 11, 2001, Coy noted the rise in indoor waterparks at Wisconsin Dells.

"This was new territory and I needed to know about this, so I studied it and the players involved," Coy said.

He met an architect involved in waterpark projects. From there, he met Bill Haralson of Richardson, Texas, a noted authority in the development of amusement attractions. The match brought two strong personalities together, but their skills complimented each other as they studied the feasibility of developing an indoor waterpark in Iowa.

"That's when we started assembling information about indoor waterparks," Coy said. "No one had done it, so we began developing our database in order to analyze the industry."

They began publishing their information in "World Waterpark" magazine and then presenting it at conferences. Their original one-day seminar has grown to two days.

"We wanted to become the leading authorities on the concept," Coy said.

Today, he and Haralson are working with projects across the United States and Canada. Most of their work comes at the early stages of a project that can take several years from concept to final construction.

"Waterparks, when done right, can help established properties or provide new properties with a strong attraction," Coy said.

"You're going to see this concept spread from north to south. This is a fun business to be in. It might sound corny, but it's fun to create stuff for families and their children to do."

As long as the water flows.