O ne September afternoon in 2020, Vera Manoukian received a call from a recruiter on behalf of a hotel chain making ambitious expansion plans. Would she, the caller inquired, want to be chief operating officer of Sonesta International as it ramped up from just 58 properties to more than 1,100, with upwards of 100,000 rooms?

Manoukian, a 58-year veteran of the hotel business who was then head of the Hilton brand, was intrigued. It was a time when hospitality was practically off the radar that it was practically invisible. Since then, flown so far under the skin and bones, Sonesta withered. In 2011, the chain was overtaken by Chinese investors. In 2016, Sonesta’s COO in November of that year, the company’s COO, was replaced. The removal of that brand’s top executive was aimed at rebuilding the hotel chain instead of being a harbinger of change. So was it a chance to redefine the potential to fundamentally reshape business travel. Here also was a chance to rethink both the business model and the principles of hotel design in ways that would help coax guests back on the road. Shocking some of her former colleagues, Manoukian became Sonesta’s COO in November 2020. The chance to start from scratch was too unusual to pass up.

World-shaking events aside, the hotel business isn’t what it used to be. Over the past couple of decades, the biggest chains have steadily gobbled up smaller ones, while simultaneously selling off their actual hotel buildings to concentrate almost exclusively on marketing and operations. The biggest, Marriott, has 30 different brands encompassing more than 8,000 hotels. But you can count the number of properties this nearly $60bn company owns on your fingers and toes — most were spun out into another company in 1993, and the rest were sold off. Same story at Hilton and IHG. The rest are mostly split between the big brands and franchises, or directly managed by chains. According to hospitality data provider STR. As it did for so many industries, the pandemic laid bare diverging agendas. That means when you walk through lobbies and empty rooms echoing lobbies and empty rooms, you’re left wondering whether the industry may look different. According to Broke Masters, there is a potential to fundamentally reshape business travel. Here also was a chance to rethink both the business model and the principles of hotel design in ways that would help coax guests back on the road. Shocking some of her former colleagues, Manoukian became Sonesta’s COO in November 2020. The chance to start from scratch was too unusual to pass up.

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Sonesta, Manoukian realised, was a unique chance to redefine post-pandemic travel on behalf of a very different kind of hotel company. At a time when industry profits were down more than 95 per cent and the biggest US hoteliers were on the defensive, the real estate moguls who owned Sonesta planned to steal a march. It was already becoming clear that domestic travel would recover much faster than for-flung trips, and the spread of remote working had put paid to some of the growth of the hotel industry as a whole. But Sonesta’s potential to fundamentally reshape business travel here also was a chance to rethink both the business model and the principles of hotel design in ways that would help coax guests back on the road. Shocking some of her former colleagues, Manoukian became Sonesta’s COO in November 2020. The chance to start from scratch was too unusual to pass up.

Manoukian, 58, is a fast walker and a fast talker. Leaving Lebanon for the US as a teenager, she studied chemistry in college and stumbled into hospitality after seeing a “help wanted” sign. She rose rapidly, becoming Sheraton’s youngest hotel general manager at the age of 29. By 2020, she had worked for big players including Starwood and Hilton, and watched as the industry bounced back from 9/11, the financial crisis, recession and more. But to be planning a post-pandemic expansion in the depths of the pandemic was something else.

There was only one problem: “Who is a Sonesta?” she asked.

Founded in 1937, Massachusetts-based Sonesta once owned luxury hotels such as New York’s Plaza and Washington’s Mayflower. When Manoukian was in college in the 1980s, the group’s pyramid-shaped Cambridge hotel was a hot place to take visiting parents (and their credit cards) for brunch. But as large hotel chains transformed into managers and marketers of stables of carefully delineated brands ranging from puffy to bare bones, Sonesta withered. In 2011, it was acquired by a little-known real estate investor and had, since then, flown so far under the radar that it was practically invisible.

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"Guests really want to come into a space where they can be in the open but also in their own room," says interior designer Staci Paton, who has worked on the reimagining of the Sonesta Select brand.

"They don't feel like they are big enough to have different brands," she says. "But if you take a look at Murray and RMR agreed. So they shelled out $90mn for the parent company of Red Lion Hotels in March 2021. That not only added more than 900 hotels, mostly midscale and economy properties in the west and midwest, it also gave the expertise to sign other hotel owners. "They've become a real player in the market," says Alam Pirani, executive managing director of Colliers Hotels, which advises hotel investors. "I think they are going to be aggressive." Manoukian, Sonesta's new CEO, charged him, hiring a former colleague from Starwood as marketing director and someone else to focus on branding. They brought in consultants to develop slogans and standards and to sketch out new room and lobby designs. Her goal, she says, was: "I want to go from 'What is a Sonesta?' to 'I want a Sonesta.'"

In large markets like the UK, a hotel’s brand is crucial because travellers have many options and relatively few sources of reference. "I don’t personally use booking sites. Guidebooks and lists of faves, that’s about a dozen; the same is true for Cincinnati, Ohio or Richmond, Virginia," she says. "So it’s got to be sterile, but it’s a safe bet. “For most people, this is the pinnacle of discretionary spend. They want a really great experience, no disappointment,” says Robin Hutton, founder of the UK’s Hotel du Vin and The Pig, both of which managed to combine the recognisability of a chain with boutique sensibility.

RMG exhibits little to no glitz, no wacky branding gurus, not even one celebrity heirress.

In theory, it shouldn’t be that hard to get hotel branding right, Hutson says. "Basics will go a long way. If you buy a meal and want from a hotel is a really great mattress, enough water pressure in the shower, and you want it to be dark and quiet and the pillow to be soft. It is not rocket science.

Yet when Sonesta executives started running focus groups with guests and potential guests, they discovered that many of them found travel inherently stressful, feeling only “accepted by paying a business.” Booking a hotel was particularly nerve-racking because so many places failed to live up to photos posted online. To the new chief marketing and brand officer Elizabeth Spitzer, that was one of the hospitality as a front-desk clerk in The Mayflower, that uncease “Guests were hungry for a sense of calm and things to help them relax,” says Sonesta’s managing director. “We create spaces or experiences that fulfill these needs.” At Sonesta’s budget, extended-stay properties, the answer was pretty straightforward. Guests worry they are in construction, say, or nursing on extended assignments that might last a month or two. So the staff quickly become familiar. "It's such a simple gesture is being shaped by the guest," says Staci Patton, a Chicago-based researcher. "It's like coming home from work every day. You can gather around the barbecue and have a beer."

As what is certain to matter day to day are the thousands of standards that will come to define Sonesta’s brand. A branded hotel is not a brand of the operational (the size of pillows and how long they can be used before they need to be washed) and the experiential (the genre of music playing in the lobby and its lighting) but rather a set of the certainty of the carpets in the corridors). As such, "assets light" hoteliers, Hilton, IHG and the other big chains use such standards to ensure guests receive a uniform experience. But expansive requirements — particularly for brands geared as ADC (architecture, design and construction) — can and do lead to resentment among building owners and property managers. "In our case, it will be easier how we sell to each target customer-type — a demanding business traveller who might tack business travel or remote work around a personal weekend. So Thursday to Monday are now busy days, and travellers want a little bit of fantasy that you don't get to life." says Tonya Inman, the local leader. "It's such a simple gesture, but people remember it."

On a snowy February day Manoukian strides to the front of a big ballroom in White Plains, New York to the sound of INXS. "Need You Tonight" is blaring, and the assembled hotel staff are cheering loudly. "Let's bring the house, guys," she says, grabbing a Sonesta-branded clipper and shaking it. "I love your energy and passion. I’m going to bottle it."

Her visit is the culmination of a week-long training session meant to get Sonesta employees around the country enthusiastic about their new brand and about growing the company. Reception agents, housekeepers and maintenance workers alike have been deluged with Sonesta swag, offered meals usually reserved for guests and invited to discuss how the company’s various slogans would apply to their jobs and their hotel's target guests.

Anyone who has sat in on a similar session knows marketing speak can quickly get astruse. But when talk of a “powerhouse” customer that the company's meeting business traveller who might tack some on at leisure time — comes up, some of the White Plains staff immediately perk up. They have a specific customer who always room 3062 and makes her displeasure clear if it is not available. “So now it’s in her profile. For the powerhouse, we provide solutions, not excuses,” says Tonya Inman, the local leader. "Now Sonesta has outlined what each brand represents, it makes it a lot easier how we sell to each target guest."

As the staff raise plastic flutes of sparkling cider to toast the changes, Manoukian sums up the task at hand: “You are the ones who are going to bring the brand to life.”

"But rallying the troops will not be enough. "Hotels should offer a bit of fantasy that you don't get at home. When you walk through the front door of your own house, there is something exciting about that little thing that is 'free' that you aren't expecting," Hutson says. Perhaps the most famous effort along these lines started in the 1980s at DoubleTree, now owned by Hilton. The chain first put freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies in VIP rooms as part of “nights out” turns-down services, but it eventually shifted to handing them out to everyone at the check-in desk. The chain’s 600 odd hotels now give out 65,000 every day, or more than 25mm a year. "In other words, you would not imagine how many people referred to that cookie," Hutson says. "It's such a simple gesture, but people remember it.

Sonesta’s search for similar gestures is being shaped by the pandemic. For the full-service Sonesta hotels, management aimed squarely at post-Covid travellers. Surveys show that 60 per cent of customers are looking to meet new people on vacation and 79 per cent see travel as part of self-care. "We're going to roll out bar carts stocked with ready-to-drink cocktails in their lobby and find places to offer organised group hikes, walks and runs in areas where appropriate. The goal is a partnership that will allow guests to download the mindfulness and yoga apps we're so famous for everywhere," says Jack Buxonic, Sonesta’s new brand leader.

A more budget Simply Suites is focusing on helping to counteract the loneliness that comes with many experiences. This includes offering free, freshly popped popcorn in the lobby, twice-monthly visits from local food trucks and a grill on the patio to encourage guests to congregate. "It's a fundamental rethinking of travel and how important it is to us," says Murray. "There's no pool, no spa. [But] every property will have a grill. It's like coming home from work every day. You can gather around the barbecue and have a beer."

If you have to think about a hotel's target guests, you are not being personal." Lighting aimed "Here's the culmination of a week-long training session meant to get Sonesta employees around the country enthusiastic about their new brand and about growing the company. Reception agents, housekeepers and maintenance workers alike have been deluged with Sonesta swag, offered meals Colour and fixtures in the lobbies will be used to define visibly different areas for dining, working and sitting
at making the hotels’ outdoor space more welcoming was toned down from fancy lanterns to string lights. The designs also incorporated the latest research on germaphobic travellers: wood floors and lacquered furniture rather than fluffy carpets and soft surfaces. Keeping corners visible and using light-coloured bathroom surfaces help reassure guests that rooms are clean.

In the lobby, the hotels will use colour and fixtures to create visibly different areas for dining, working and sitting, so they feel less cavernous when only partly full — a familiar problem during the pandemic. That means a blue stained-wood area between reception and the restaurant, and a bright yellow booth for making private phone calls. “Guests really want to come into a space where they can be in the open but also in their own nook,” Patton explains. “Together, but alone-together.”

**Sonesta’s rethink of post-pandemic travel looks a lot more like a series of tweaks than a wholesale shake-up. And compared to some of the edgier offerings at the bigger chains, the branding is relatively vanilla.**

That’s on purpose. Harlow, Sonesta’s marketing chief, argues the chain is putting owners and guests first. “This is what they’re looking for in their physical spaces. This is what they need,” she says. “Rather than having things that might be perceived as radically different, we wanted to develop things that our guests were asking for. Crazy standards are one thing, but unless we deliver the best guest experience we can, based on what our guests are telling us, they don’t mean a whole heck of a lot.”

To that end, Sonesta revamped its website and launched its first smartphone app, making it easier to book. A relaunched loyalty programme is due in the autumn. In the meantime, it has signed up 20 franchise hotels and expects to hit 50 by June, crucial to getting its name in front of more people. It re-entered the New York City market in April by purchasing a majority stake in four Manhattan boutique hotels. “If you don’t have a hotel in New York, you don’t really have a brand,” says Murray. This isn’t hubris: meeting planners and big corporate travel departments won’t do business with a chain that doesn’t have several New York options. He is looking for deals in Miami and Los Angeles, two huge markets where Sonesta lacks a presence.

Sonesta remains 50 years and many billions behind the big names in corporate hospitality. Marriott, Hilton and IHG each have more than 5,000 hotels and dozens of brands among them. Not that it seems like much of a deterrent to Murray. In early April, the company convened its new customer advisory board, composed of guests and business partners, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Murray showed up to make a personal pitch on the chain’s behalf. “Our goal is that when somebody says, ‘Where are you going to stay?’, they’ll answer, ‘I’m debating’, [and] we want to be in that conversation.” He was delivering his speech to a meeting room in a recently refurbished, luxury Sonesta.

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