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Equinox Hotels represents the next generation of lifestyle branding

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How does a brand become a lifestyle, and vice versa? Equinox is an ideal case study for exploring that very concept. New York City's massive \$20-billion real estate development Hudson Yards officially opened on March 15, but it'll be at least another month until it welcomes one of its most anticipated anchors: the first-ever Equinox Hotel.

The fact that Equinox, the brand best known as a luxury fitness chain of nearly 100 clubs around the world, is opening a hotel at Hudson Yards isn't entirely unexpected. Equinox is a subsidiary of The Related Companies, the same real estate developer behind Hudson Yards and nearby Columbus Circle.

But the decision, on Related's part, to evolve Equinox from simply a fitness club brand into a true lifestyle brand — that also happens to now include hotels — was a process that took years in the making. And it's a process that makes for an interesting look into how a brand can change over time.

"Some years ago, there was a very interesting evolution that happened when the brand moved from being recognized

as a great fitness club to becoming a lifestyle brand,” Christopher Norton, CEO of Equinox Hotels, said.

Norton explained this evolution as one where “people used to go to the gym because they had to go” versus today, when “people go to the gym because they want to go to the gym.” Today, it’s not uncommon for someone who gets “angry” or “antsy” for missing a workout.

“It’s not just going to the gym; it’s a lifestyle,” Norton said. “And so, Equinox has positioned the brand as a lifestyle brand, way beyond a club or a gym.”

That positioning, he said, is already being reflected in how Equinox is building its newest clubs, with the emphasis on hotel-like social spaces, as well as the brand’s many provocative ad campaigns over the years. One of them, “Commit to Something” from 2016, showed model Lydia Hearst famously nursing her twins. In 2014, the company debuted the campaign, #EquinoxMadeMeDolt, echoing the company’s tagline, “It’s not fitness; it’s life.”

To market Equinox Hotels, the brand is purposely playing coy for now. The only marketing material to date debuted in February, and it includes a short video featuring model Naomi Campbell in a series of futuristic environments in which she embodies the primary pillars of the brand: movement, nourishment, and dreaming. The final shot reads: “For those who want it all.” There are no images of the hotel or the guest rooms, nor any indication that this is a video promoting a hotel brand until the very end of the clip when “Equinox Hotels” makes an appearance.

Now, approximately one month away from opening the doors of the first-ever Equinox Hotel, Norton and his team are beginning to reveal — in a very orchestrated manner — exactly how they plan to extend this brand into the hotel space, and beyond.

For a closer look at Equinox’s evolution into a lifestyle brand that now includes hotels, Skift spoke with Norton, as well as David Gutstadt, former chief investment officer of Equinox Hotels, and Chekitan S. Dev, professor of marketing at Cornell University’s School of Hotel Administration in the SC Johnson College of Business. Here’s what they had to say.

IDENTIFYING THE MARKET

Before Related ever even decided to launch an Equinox Hotel, the company wondered if it should work with an existing hotel brand or use its own, Gutstadt said.

From 2012 to 2017, Gutstadt served as Related’s managing director of hospitality, eventually becoming the chief investment officer of Equinox Hotels before he left to launch his own bespoke membership club/hotel in Philadelphia, called Fitler Club. After leaving Related/Equinox in April 2017, he stayed on as a consultant until the fall of 2017.

“My experience was dealing with literally every single hotel company or brand out there,” Gutstadt recalled. “I started with a list of every single lifestyle and luxury brand I could think of, looked at where they are located, what the pros and cons were, case studies on all of the emerging brands like Virgin, Edition, Bulgari, and SydeLL Group. Is there a business case to put the money and investment into this?”

He said that, ultimately, Equinox realized it has a “secret sauce” in that it has the brand recognition that all lifestyle brands aspire to possess.

For example, he said, “I don’t know what a Nobu hotel really means except that it has a Nobu restaurant. Any hotel could have a Nobu restaurant in it. But when you stay with Equinox, it really embodies a definitive lifestyle. There are plenty of brands where you say ‘brand X’ and it doesn’t stand for something. But Equinox stands for something.”

Norton said that when Related was exploring the possibility of launching an Equinox Hotel, the company did a number of surveys to determine if, even among existing members, there would be a desire to want to stay in an Equinox-branded hotel.

“Ninety percent of the members said if they could, they would stay in an Equinox hotel because they like the idea of the extension of their lifestyle into their travels,” Norton said. “That’s a huge, huge number.”

It also helped, he said, that loyalty to the brand is so strong. “There’s nobody at that scale that demands or commands that sort of membership fees that people happily pay because it’s such an exceptional experience, and they use the word ‘experience’ versus a workout.”

DEFINING LUXURY ON EQUINOX'S TERMS

While Equinox, in the fitness club world, is considered a luxury brand, it wasn't also exactly clear what kind of luxury its hotels would embody. In June 2016, Related hired the former co-owner and chief strategic officer of Generator Hostels, Josh Wyatt, to serve as president of Equinox Hotels. (Wyatt is now the CEO of collaborative workspace brand NeueHouse.)

Three months later, in August 2016, Related brought in Christopher Norton to be CEO of its hotels business, and from there, the brand's definition of luxury began to become that much clearer.

For Norton, who spent more than 28 years with Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, most recently serving as its chief operating officer before becoming CEO of Equinox Hotels, luxury "has become a bit boring" and "predictable" in a "sea of sameness."

He also said it's more apparent than ever that there are two types of luxury today: "old-world or old-fashioned luxury" and an "experience type of luxury" that focuses on "programming" and "integrating" every experience a guest could possibly have.

"We didn't want to go either/or," Norton said. "We wanted to do both."

He also said that he wanted to make sure that Equinox Hotels distinguished itself from other lifestyle hotels in terms of exceptional service and providing real consistency. "It's not about a rooftop bar and lots of parties, which, if you want to, you can have. But it's a lifestyle around the choices you make when you want to be healthy, fit, and strong, and have all of these important pieces in your life."

Today's luxury, Norton explained, is "very personal" and "has a rareness to it" that is "superior in the execution of quality."

"Real luxury," he said, "doesn't feel expensive." It "feels comfortable, natural — and makes you feel good. As soon as luxury starts feeling pretentious, contrived, or like you're trying too hard and it's over designed, it's not real luxury. The way we want to define luxury, we want to rewrite the playbook on luxury. It's the way we look at what today's client confirms as luxury."

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE FIRST EQUINOX HOTEL

A model bathroom from the new Equinox Hotel in New York City. Source: Equinox Hotels

"Total and complete synergy" is how Norton described the connection between the Equinox fitness club experience and the hotel experience, and that it starts from the very moment you arrive at the flagship 212-room property in New York.

"Two of the most important moments in a hotel experience are arrival and departure — the first five minutes and then the last five minutes," he said. "I don't think there's another hotel in New York City that, when you arrive, you don't have to fight the curb. Once you get out, there's a sidewalk and all these people you have to navigate through."

With Equinox, however, the entrance is enclosed within a private plaza — already making it a bit of an escape or sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of the city.

"It's super important that when you arrive, you get an Equinox experience. You're not checking into a hotel that has a club," he explained. "You're not going to a club that has rooms on top of it. It's this seamless experience where we've tied in all this technology, culture, and behavior."

The overall brand concept for Equinox Hotels is built on three pillars: movement, nutrition, and regeneration.

The first property in New York will feature, arguably, the brand's most state-of-the-art and largest Equinox fitness club to date, measuring some 60,000 square feet alone. Hotel guests become fitness club members for the duration of their stay, and the club will offer group classes, Pilates, personal training, a 25-yard-long saltwater pool and other pools, and

a SoulCycle on the ground floor (SoulCycle is a sister brand to Equinox).

Nutrition is also a major focus for the brand, and while Norton said it's important that the hotel offer "healthy food without being health food." Equinox enlisted famed restaurateur Stephen Starr to lead the hotel's culinary concepts, and Starr has brought on chef Kyle Knall, formerly of New York City's Gramercy Tavern and Maysville restaurants, to spearhead the cuisine at Electric Lemon.

Norton said that at Equinox, food is thought of as fuel but it's about being thoughtful and making sure the food still tastes, well, good. And the restaurant itself isn't traditional fine dining, but more casual and relaxed. The room service menu, he pointed out, will feature things like IV drips to help guests recover from a bad case of jet lag.

As for regeneration, there's also a massive spa that will be a part of the hotel, as well as a very large focus on ensuring guests get the best possible sleep that they can. Norton said Equinox has an entire advisory board of experts whom the company worked with to make sure that guests sleep better during their stays and to create a room that's essentially "a sleep chamber" with the optimal lighting, temperature, and a mattress specifically designed to deliver restful sleep.

The spa, in particular, has a special wave bed that is designed to help guests regenerate within minutes. "We have a bed that gives you the equivalent of three hours' worth of sleep in 30 minutes because it puts you right into deep sleep," Norton explained. "I get an amazing night of sleep in this room, and it's not just about looking pretty; it's about substance. There's substance in the room. And if I go to the spa, within an hour or two, I recover far beyond that."

Norton also doesn't see the guest room as an escape, but more of a place to simply recharge. "We don't have a treadmill or bicycle in the room," he said. "You don't exercise in the room. In our view, you exercise in the club and you regenerate in the room."

"In a typical luxury hotel room, you have between 40 and 50 items for consumption; we will offer between 70 and 80 items — there is no typical separation of retail here," Norton also noted. "We blur the lines here because of the convenience. Luxury is convenience. Luxury is a hassle-free environment. Luxury is not worrying."

Underlying all of these efforts, is a network of technology investments that Equinox is also heavily investing in, including a member-focused recognition and customization platform, and a new Equinox Hotels app that piggybacks onto the existing Equinox Fitness Clubs app. While rooms aren't voice activated, ("It's too early for us to do it," Norton said, adding, "We've tried it and tested it.") they do, he assured, use technology to create an experience for guests that makes the entire stay more effortless and intuitive.

Being an Equinox fitness club member will also have its benefits, Norton noted, saying that members will be able to see special member-specific room rates and enjoy complimentary laundry services for their gym clothes during their stays.

And while it won't be available at opening, Norton also said he hasn't ruled out the possibility of looking at how to incorporate co-working into the Equinox Hotels brand, either. "It's on the radar," he said. "It makes a lot of sense. It's a piece that just fits in with what we offer, as a kind of 360-degree view on life, this blending of borders."

WILL EQUINOX HOTELS ULTIMATELY BE A SUCCESS?

We're less than a month away from the opening, but it's clear that many are wondering if Equinox Hotels can match up to the success that its fitness clubs have had.

The competition for fitness- or wellness-led hospitality brands is becoming stronger each day, with longstanding brands like Westin and newer ones like InterContinental Hotels Group's Even still holding court, said Chekitan S. Dev, professor of marketing at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration in the SC Johnson College of Business.

"The challenge for Equinox," Dev said, "will be to differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded hospitality brandscape. The key for Equinox would be to blend hospitality and fitness in a novel, distinct, and integrated way." He added, they also need to "carefully segment the market to target fitness-oriented guests: those that do it and those that want to."

Dev's own research has shown that even though there is a lot of general interest in wellness when it comes to hotels, most hotel guests rarely even use fitness centers at their hotels.

“My own research shows that about 19 percent of hotel guests use hotel fitness centers compared to 46 percent that plan to do so,” Dev said. “There’s also a marked difference in who uses a fitness center and when. My own research shows that those most likely to use fitness stays are longer-stay guests (26 percent) and suburban hotel guests (25 percent). Those least likely to use it are midscale leisure (5 percent).”

While New York will be home to the first-ever Equinox Hotel, plans are already in the works to bring the brand to cities that include Seattle, Houston, Chicago, Santa Clara, Calif.; and downtown Los Angeles over the next three years. Norton mentioned London and Hawaii as possible future locations as well.

Dev, said, in conclusion, “Equinox Hotels, with better, thoughtfully designed and integrated fitness programs, has the potential to be a game changer in helping guests exercise more frequently and improve their health while on the road.”

Moreover, Dev also thinks “co-living and co-working” can also “help Equinox differentiate itself ... Just as Starbucks positioned itself as the ‘third place’ between work and home, by integrating co-working and co-playing into their ‘gymotels,’ Equinox Hotels can be all three places: home, work, gym, offering guests a high-quality integrated hospitality experience.”

In fact, what Dev alludes to sounds a lot like the tagline Equinox is using to market the new hotels brand: “For those who want it all.” The bigger question, however, remains: Can Equinox Hotels deliver it all? We’ll find out when the hotel opens next month.