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People in Business

UP CLOSE / VICKI GORDON, managing partner, Collins Gordon group: Not shy, not retiring
Gordon ends 36-year career, then starts firm to push 'giving back'

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Like many of her baby boomer generation, Vicki Gordon is helping redefine what it means to enter "Life Part II."

Gordon was senior vice president of corporate affairs for Atlanta-based InterContinental Hotels Group, whose brands include the Crowne Plaza, InterContinental and Holiday Inn chains. She retired last month, at age 60, after a 36-year career in the hospitality industry.

But rather than exiting the rat race of the corporate superhighway, Gordon has launched a business, Collins Gordon Group, which marries two of her passions: giving back to the community and involving the corporate sector in social responsibility and the discussions that shape public policy.

It seems a sensible transition for Gordon, who has been involved in issues important to the hotel industry on a national level. One of the key issues she has worked on involves immigration reform and its impact on the pipeline to workers in the hotel industry, travel promotion and privacy rules concerning data and other sensitive personal information and homeland security.

"The mission is to work with corporations and work with organizations to help them integrate and create a business strategy that delivers both business results and creates positive social change," Gordon said during a recent interview.

What she hopes to do also stems from personally being able to explain and connect the dots for people because of some of the social policy and charity work in which she has been involved through UNICEF, CARE and InterContinental Hotels Group itself.

Case in point: Microlending, which helps people start businesses by giving them small loans, is something she's passionate about. To illustrate her point, she talked about her involvement with a Costa Rican farm family of 10 who earned enough from agriculture to support themselves. But as their eight children began growing up and having families of their own, it was getting more difficult.

"There wasn't enough to support all of the children and the extended family, and the children were moving away," she said.

So they took a microloan through a program co-sponsored by InterContinental Hotels Group and the CATIE agricultural research center in Costa Rica, which seeks to relieve poverty through sustainable farming. The \$8,000 loan allowed them to build an organic sugar cane refinery.

"They knew if they could build a refinery that it would drive their costs down, plus other farmers would be able to use it," she said.

Their decision reverberated positively both for the family and the greater community.

"This family got the refinery, they've been able to bring all of their sons back into the family business, and they've been able to hire a laborer from a neighboring farm."

Q: You've retired, and a lot of people after a long career would look at retirement as the time to sit back and relax. Why not simply do that?

A: Because I would go crazy and probably drive my husband crazy. Retiring from a really fulfilling and fun career doesn't mean retiring from life. This is the next chapter in my book and there's a lot to be written in that book.

Q: Why launch a new company?

A: For me it was time to step back and say what do I want to do from this point on? Do I want to keep doing this or chart new territory? People are reinventing themselves, they're starting new careers and following their passions.

Q: Some observers would say that a business' primary objective, particularly publicly traded firms, is to give its shareholders the best possible returns. It's not obliged to get involved in social policy or public giving. Why do you say they should?

A: I do believe that there is a business case for community involvement because it drives business results. People looking to work for a company have said that it factors whether or not they view the company as a good corporate citizen. Employees feel good in knowing that the company is engaged in giving back. It's human nature. We all want to feel like we're making a difference.

Q: Some shareholders still would argue that the primary focus should be highest possible returns, though.

A: While a corporation's No. 1 mission is to drive value for the shareholders, companies that are involved and engaged in their community, I think, [are] good for business.

Q: But can't some of that just be perceived as good PR? They're doing it because it puts them in a positive light?

A: Not if they're doing it for the right reasons. Hopefully, they're doing it because it makes sense for the business. I want them to be able to look back and say, 'We did that because it was absolutely the right thing to do and it was the right thing for our business.'

Q: So what is your role in this? What will you do exactly?

A: I hope that I can be a catalyst by helping to bridge the private sector and the nonprofits and the public sector as well. I think there's an opportunity to help people understand how they can look at things in a different way. My role is to help these corporations understand how they can achieve and drive results and reach their business objectives.

Q: Why is corporate involvement in shaping public policy or at least being involved in the discussion so important?

A: For one thing, I think corporations have the might and the muscle to get things done that individuals can't. A

perfect example would be InterContinental Hotels Group. We've got roughly 3,000 hotels in North America. Unfortunately there isn't an available work force to fill these jobs. We've been advocating for a rational policy for legal immigration. Work force availability and readiness are important. If we don't have that, then it hurts our business.

Q: So are you more of what people would consider a lobbyist?

A: No, not in that sense. I would say I'm more of an advocate. I'm helping organizations understand the impact public policy has on their business and their corporate strategy.

THE VICKI GORDON FILE

> Age: 60

> Family: Husband of 30 years, Bill; seven stepchildren, Rick, Marge, Andy, Bill, Vicki, Alaire and Allison; 11 step-grandchildren; two step-great-grandchildren; and four cats, Miss Kitty, Simba, Blackster and Tugger.

> Career: 36 years in hotel industry with 19 at InterContinental Hotels Group before retiring June 30. Launched her own firm, Collins Gordon Group, July 1.

> Recent Book: "Run With the Horsemen" by Ferrol Sams.

> Worst hotel moment: From a hotel operations perspective, the death of a guest while in the hotel is the worst. From my perspective as a frequent hotel guest, the worst experience is without a doubt a poor service experience with no attempt at service recovery by hotel management.

> Song that best describes me: "Come Fly With Me" by Frank Sinatra.