



# Corporate gifts from paper recycling

## Executive summary

Semiramis Intercontinental, one of Egypt’s most renowned hotels, demonstrates a commitment to society and the environment. Since the mid-1990s, Semiramis has pursued an initiative to reduce its paper waste by giving it to a local non-governmental organisation that turns it into recycled products. These products are then bought by the hotel to be used as corporate gifts. This process provides underprivileged women and independent artisans with full-time jobs as well as a steady income.

This case study shows how companies can work with local NGOs to empower local communities and achieve sustainability objectives.



COUNTRY  
Egypt

NAME  
Semiramis Intercontinental  
Cairo

TYPE  
Business hotel

FIELDS OF INCLUSION  
Crafts,  
food and beverages



## How the business model works

Semiramis Intercontinental Cairo is part of the global Intercontinental Hotel Group chain and caters to tourists and business travellers. Located in a prime location in downtown Cairo, the hotel has 1,059 bedrooms, 12 restaurants and bars, and 11 function rooms.

### Sustainable corporate gifts with a story

Nabila Samak, director of marketing communications, initiated the project promoting sustainable gifts in 1995 when she was looking for locally produced greeting cards. The idea was to find an alternative to imported corporate gifts by promoting local crafts, thereby supporting local jobs and entrepreneurship. Corporate gifts are given throughout the year to VIPs, long-term guests and families with children. The company's top management levels have supported this initiative from the start, which has helped drive its success.

To produce the gifts, Semiramis partners with the Association for the Protection of the Environment (A.P.E.), a Cairo-based NGO that targets job creation and development opportunities for girls and women working as informal garbage collectors. The annual number of gifts ordered ranges from 1,000 to 2,000 depending on the hotel's needs. These major fluctuations can be attributed to the crisis ongoing in Egypt since 2011, which has had a direct impact on the hotel's occupancy rate. In 2013, the hotel purchased USD 2,000 worth of gifts from A.P.E.

The corporate gifts are inspired by Egyptian cultural heritage. Each gift has a unique story to tell that is communicated through an attached tag explaining A.P.E.'s work and how the gift has a positive impact on the women employed. Semiramis does not sell the products itself but does, on occasions such as Christmas, provide A.P.E. with space in the lobby free of charge where the

NGO can display and sell its products directly. The hotel also places small "Bedtime Story" flyers in the guest rooms that provide information about the NGO's work, the local community's living conditions and other A.P.E. products on offer.

### Coming full circle by recycling hotel paper waste

The cycle begins with hotel employees gathering all discarded paper and storing it in a designated location, which is collected by A.P.E. once a month. Using this paper waste, the women then create a range of gifts, including gift boxes, key chains, bracelets, earrings and greeting cards.

For each order of corporate gifts, Semiramis provides A.P.E. with design and quality-control specifications. Semiramis pays for the production of these gifts, picks them up, and then gives them to guests or sends them to corporate clients. A.P.E. also works with other clients such as Diwan Bookstore, Egypt Crafts Center and Markaz.

### Buying from artisans and farmers

A.P.E. is Semiramis' main partner for corporate gifts. However, the hotel also works directly with local artisans, purchasing crafts such as traditional hand-woven baskets and pottery. The hotel incorporates local products into its operations whenever possible using, for example, handwoven baskets as hampers. Recently, Semiramis also began procuring sustainably sourced food for its restaurants whenever possible or when requested by clients. In May 2014, the hotel hosted Egypt's first conference on sustainable business practices in the local food and restaurant industry. During this conference, the hotel implemented its sustainable catering concept for the dishes served throughout the event.

## SPOTLIGHT

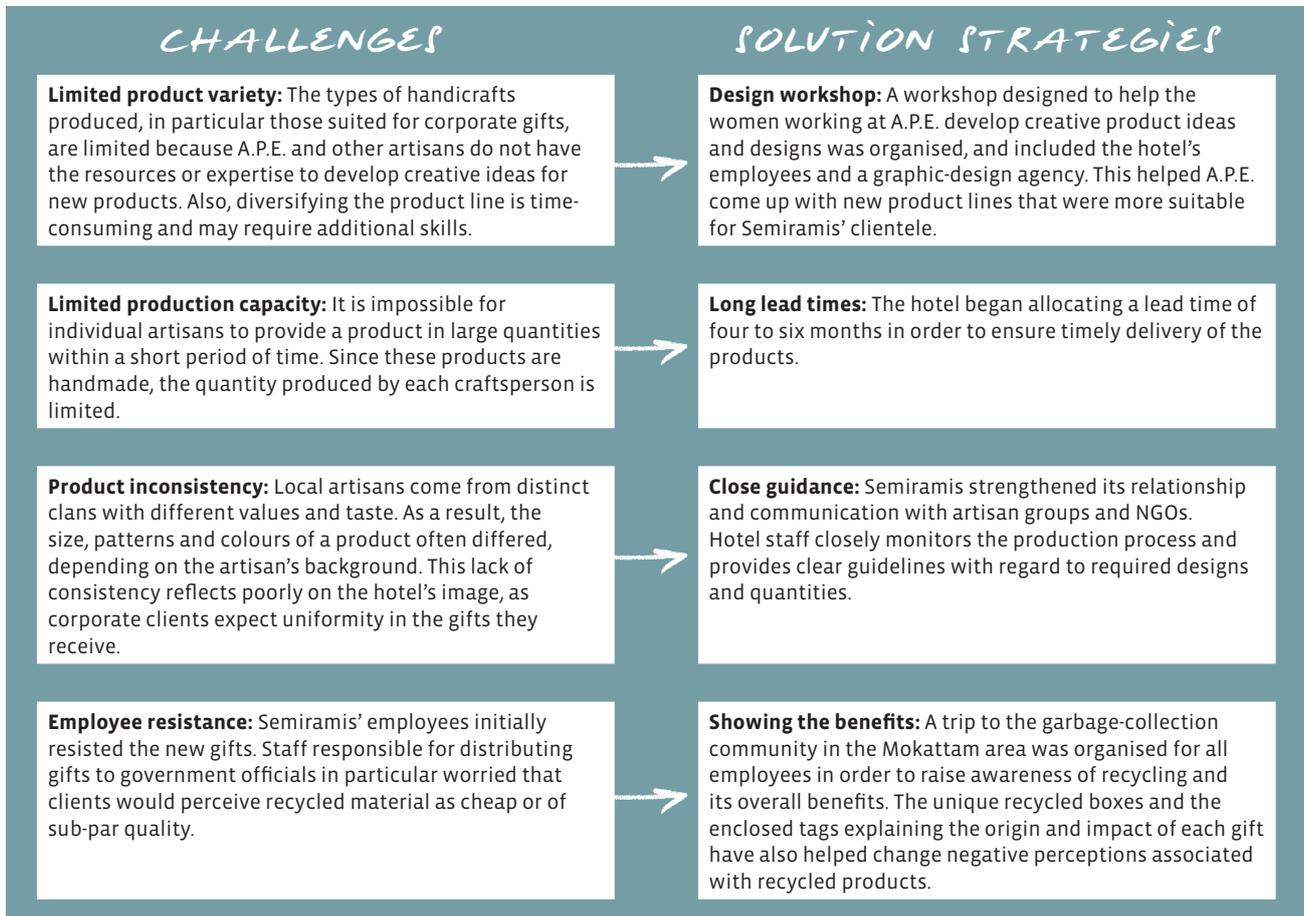
### *A reliable income enabled Hoda Fayek to invest in education*



Hoda Fayek was trained at A.P.E. as a child. Today, she heads the paper recycling project. The security of a stable income has helped her gain access to an education. Thanks to her work with A.P.E., which ensured her ongoing employment and paid holidays during exam periods, she has completed her education. Emphasising the opportunities provided by stability, she says: "Receiving orders

ensures the sustainability of the project. This means that we will get our salaries, be able to educate our children and have access to the services we need." Thanks to her work with A.P.E., Hoda Fayek was able to obtain a diploma, since the NGO provided continuous employment and allowed her paid vacations when she had exams and needed to study.

## Challenges and solution strategies



## Mutual benefits

### Business benefits

Semiramis offers its guests access to an authentic experience by making unique crafts readily available either as gifts through the concierge, as items on seasonal offer by NGOs, or as items sold directly by craftspeople in the hotel lobby. This mitigates the stress involved with dealing with local vendors in tourist areas. The culture of sustainability is felt by every guest, and the handicrafts impart a sense of doing good. Overall, this ensures repeated stays and positive reviews which, in turn, attract new guests and produce financial benefits for the hotel.

This business model has also facilitated a stronger relationship between the hotel and the local community. The positive word-of-mouth publicity about the hotel led other craftspeople to approach Semiramis about potential partnerships. This increased the pool of sup-

pliers, which increased competition amongst them and, ultimately, improved the quality of the handicrafts.

The culture of sustainability enhanced the hotel's reputation and solidified its ties to government agencies. Semiramis has received the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism's Environmental Shield Award three years in a row. Having strong government relations is of prime importance in Egypt, where bureaucracy is formidable and solid connections are essential to business growth.

Furthermore, involving hotel employees in the recycling project fostered their enthusiasm for the project and the hotel, thereby developing loyalty to and pride in their employer. This is reflected in the hotel's high retention rates and employees' hard work.

Finally, the hotel's efforts in obtaining locally sourced food provides guests with an authentically local culinary experience. Local sourcing of food will ultimately shorten the supply chain and reduce costs in the long run.

### Development benefits

A.P.E. operates out of Mansheyet Nasser, which is an unplanned urban slum in Cairo. The NGO employs 35 women and girls from the local garbage collectors community on a full-time, in-house basis and provides free day care for those with children. Responding to cultural norms prohibiting women from work outside their homes, A.P.E. also employs 20 women who work from home. The NGO aims to empower women and children in particular, as they are traditionally denied education and development opportunities in Egyptian society.

The partnership with Semiramis Intercontinental enables A.P.E. to pay their employees monthly salaries equivalent to the national minimum wage. These em-

ployees then invest their earnings into their households. A monthly income provides them with financial independence, and learning a new skill boosts their self-confidence.

The InterContinental Hotel Group's other branches in Egypt have also begun incorporating the same gifts model. Other companies have followed in Semiramis' footsteps and started sending their discarded office paper to A.P.E. This ripple effect has benefits beyond those yielded by A.P.E. and the community that it works with; it has a positive impact on the environment and supports efforts to preserve the local heritage embodied in the handicrafts.

For A.P.E., the increase in collaboration opportunities has ensured ongoing cash flows, which has helped the NGO procure machinery needed for the project. It has also allowed A.P.E. to enrol all of its employees in health programmes and literacy and English courses.

## Outlook

Semiramis Intercontinental plans to maintain its partnership with A.P.E. while, at the same time, strengthening relations with other NGOs and local artisans. The hotel is continually looking for new opportunities to link materials with local crafts to create items such as bed linens. In an effort to support the sustainability of local artisans, the hotel is considering expanding its practices and offering artisans risk-reduction measures such as advance payments or loans. Nabila Samak also advocates establishing a platform for artisans that is designed with the corporate consumer in mind in order to make placing an order easier than it is today.



Women working at A.P.E. develop creative product ideas at a design workshop.

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### INTERVIEWS

Nabila Samak, Director of Marketing Communications, Semiramis Intercontinental Cairo

Mona Hemaya, A.P.E. volunteer and founder

Hoda Fayek, head of A.P.E.

### CONTACT

Nabila Samak, Director of Marketing Communications

Tel: +20 2 2795 7171

Email: [nabila.samak@ihg.com](mailto:nabila.samak@ihg.com)

### AUTHOR

Karine Kamel and Salma El Noshokaty, BridgEgypt

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### PHOTOS

Courtesy of Semiramis Intercontinental Cairo