

## Need barbed wire? Try the concierge.

By Teresa Méndez, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor Fri Mar 2, 3:00 AM ET

John Dowd remembers the time he was asked to help a man propose to his girlfriend in a busy Chicago shopping mall. It was a tall order: The suitor had planned his proposal for the day before Christmas, and he wanted his overture to be accompanied by an opera singer and a pianist.

With just three days to make arrangements, Mr. Dowd managed to negotiate permission, run an electrical chord to a mike for the singer, and help the man, a guest at the hotel where Dowd worked, pen his proposal. At the time, Dowd was a concierge at the Park Hyatt; now he's the head concierge at Chicago's majestic Drake Hotel. During his 15 years working in luxury hotels, Dowd says he has orchestrated close to a hundred engagements – without a single rejection.

In an effort to lure wealthy patrons and differentiate themselves from competitors, hotels are offering unusually specialized services. There are now "concierges" who attend to romance, beds, even baths. But the old-fashioned concierge, a fixture in the lobby of any grand hotel, has remained a constant. Everyone knows a concierge can secure a difficult dinner reservation. Beyond that, though, there remains some mystery around the exact parameters of the job and a mystique about the men and women who perform it.

So what exactly can a concierge do?

Just about anything, it turns out, and always with a courteous and self-effacing mien.

At the Drake Hotel, there is a saying: "The answer is yes. Now what's the question?" That sort of willing attitude can open a Pandora's box, says Dowd, who was born in Ireland and raised in London. But rather than sound concerned, he seems to delight in the job's challenges. His colleagues say it keeps their days interesting.

While the majority of what they field are garden-variety requests for restaurant referrals (400 to 500 a month), directions, and theater tickets, just about every concierge at one time has been approached with a request that could only be described as curious. A recent survey by InterContinental Hotels and Les Clefs d'Or, or "keys of gold," the prestigious professional society of concierges, included one concierge who was asked to wangle a copy of The New York Times from Sept. 17, 1957; another to enroll a guest's child in a prestigious private high school with the term beginning in just 10 days; and a third to procure 300 km of barbed wire to be shipped to a farm in South America.

Marc Simoneau, head concierge for the InterContinental Boston, recalls a Middle Eastern guest who wanted a colleague to track down an ostrich incubator.

Concierge is a French word meaning doorkeeper or keeper of the keys. The position is thought to have originated in France, possibly with the person charged with the many keys to a castle's doors.

Historically, the job was not a prestigious one; the word shares the same etymology as slave. That has changed, though. Now, the concierge is near the very top of the hotel-staff hierarchy. "They are the key, in a way, to any wishes, any whims, any desire that a guest may have," says Giuseppe Pezzotti, a lecturer at Cornell's Hotel School in Ithaca, N.Y. "When you're away from home, and don't know anyone, the concierge is somebody to rely on."

So reliable was Alec, one of the concierges that Yale sociologist Rachel Sherman includes in her new book, "Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels," that he gave his own shoes to a guest whose pair had been misplaced by housekeeping.

For these types of "extreme services," concierges are compensated at the high end of the hotel pay scale; the InterContinental survey estimates between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per year, excluding tips and commissions, which can be substantial.

In her book, Ms. Sherman argues that the unpredictability of who tips and how much, that play between guest and worker, keeps the job engaging. It also damps the resentment of working in what she says could be described as a kind of "modern servitude."

For her part, Sherman enjoyed the time she spent as a concierge while researching her book. "I think maybe it's something about being a detail oriented person," she says. "It is fun to do things to make people happy and for which they are quite appreciative."

Of course, it's not unusual for a concierge to be asked for something a client later declines. Tom Wolfe, chief concierge at the Fairmont San Francisco, was asked by a friend of Yoko Ono's to have "an astronomical amount" of her favorite flower shipped to her room in Japan. After contacting flower farms in South America, Mr. Wolfe was able to cobble together an order for more than \$20,000. When he gave the guest – who had earlier said that money would be no object – the estimate, he was thanked and told, "I don't want to spend that much."

And occasionally there are requests even the most resourceful concierge can't pull off. For Dowd at the Drake Hotel, it was another marriage proposal. With just a few hours notice, a guest asked him to arrange to have his proposal flash across the scoreboard at a Cubs game. Even with an umpire in the hotel Dowd couldn't make it happen that quickly.

"Please keep in mind," he says, "we work mostly with the telephone, not a magic wand."