

Effectively Understanding the Role of the Hotel Concierge

by Leigh Anne Dolecki, chef concierge at Campton Place, a Taj Hotel, San Francisco, CA

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What exactly is “the hotel concierge”?

In today’s marketing world, the word “concierge” seems fairly ubiquitous. We seem to have many concierges, such as the “bank concierge,” who is a bank staff member assigned to direct customers into the teller lines, to keep the lines moving efficiently. We also have the Auto Service Agency Concierge, whose main responsibility is to make sure that their customers have transportation to and from the agency while their car is being serviced. Department stores have concierges; staff members well versed in the store inventory who guide their customers to the correct line of clothing or goods to suit their needs or desires. Some of these concierges also provide general information, along with any advice and/or recommendations to their customers.

The word concierge actually dates back to mid 17th century Europe, when hosts, usually of a lavish property or castle, provided a servant whose primary responsibility was attending to the comfort of their traveling guests. This servant eventually catered to the every whim and wish of visiting nobles. They held a very important position in the household and often kept the household keys. We can be sure that this “household” key ring included those to the more “limited access” areas, such as the pantry, wine cellar, and brandy hold. He would use those keys at his own discretion on behalf of his guests. He became the “go to person” of the castle.

Eventually hotel concierges began to appear in the finest hotels of Switzerland and France, expanding on the value of the “guest service” that began in those royal households. It wasn’t until the mid 1970’s that American hotels began to add the position of concierge to their staff, providing their guests with the impeccable guest service that they came to enjoy in Europe.

Today, as in the Middle Ages, it is the concierge who sets the standard for guest service. The hotel concierge is the hotel ambassador; the very face of the hotel; the person uniquely qualified to provide your guests with personal service and special attention that shape the guest’s overall experience. From the everyday requests such as directions, local restaurant recommendations and reservations, to the more involved requests such as a

romantic marriage proposal, the return of the left-behind laptop, the private catered yacht or even the immediate need for a Mariachi band, the concierge is the person guests turn to for advice and assistance. The concierge is the hotel’s “go to person”, and his household key ring has been replaced with a “little black book”, a blackberry or an iphone. The concierge’s currency is information and relationships. His handheld device contains a vast database of information and connections: the cell phone numbers of maitre d’s and store managers, the inside and after-hours phone lines to local service providers, as well as his network of connections that have been built over the years. It also includes colleagues from the local associations and the worldwide association, Les Clefs d’Or (the keys of gold). You may identify the members of Les Clefs d’Or by the golden keys that adorn their uniform lapels. Those keys represent the highest standards of networking and service.

That explains what the hotel concierge is, but what about who the hotel concierge is?

Your average hotel concierge is someone who genuinely cares about helping people. This compassion manifests itself in many different ways. For some, it’s simply the joy of greeting their guests. For others, it’s the challenge of being able to solve anything and everything for their guests. When socializing amongst themselves, concierges talk about restaurants and chefs like avid sports fans talk baseball or football. They love to share their challenges and solutions with each other. These conversations often turn into an unspoken “one-upmanship” as they compare the difficulty of their challenges. Did you ever wonder, “How in the world did he/she know that???” Many concierges have Type A personalities and often cannot help themselves or even stop themselves from helping people. Few can pass by a map-wielding tourist on the street corner without offering assistance.

Please do not forget that this compassion and dedication is not only reserved just for the guests, but also for the hotel property as well.

What does this mean to the hotel?

You might well consider your concierge to be the “heartbeat” of your property. As the “go to” person, they

are often the first person that your guest looks for upon arrival and the last one they look for on departure. During their stay, all of your guests' miscellaneous needs are met. That sense of comfort and ease is what they take with them and what brings them back. The concierge develops a relationship with the guests, beginning before their arrival and often continuing after the guests' departure.

To the front desk staff, this means that as guests check in, they feel a sense of pride and confidence as they present a confirmation card from the concierge along with the concierge's offer of assistance with anything else they might need during their stay. It creates a moment to make them feel truly welcome.

To the bell staff and doormen, the concierge is a means of support by keeping them armed with information that makes them appear "ahead of their game". Working as a team, the bellmen and concierge staffs "wow" guests who enter the lobby to see that their needs have been anticipated; their bags are on the way up or down and their car is ready when they are. This teamwork is empowering. It creates a collective sense of pride and "ownership" of responsibility to the guests.

To the Sales and Catering Departments, the concierge is an extension to these departments to bring in groups because they are constantly networking and meeting people and promoting his property. Whether it's help with charter transportation, group dining reservations, making sure that the group's amenities have been sent, or the group contact's shoes were shined and delivered on time, the concierge ensures a smooth stay. The ever present concierge is often the first person the group turns to for assistance throughout their stay and it's the concierge who irons out any wrinkle that might occur that often "wows" the group with his/her facility in making even "spur of the moment" things happen.

To the Food and Beverage Department, this means a world of support, as the concierge supports and promotes your property's outlets to your guests, and to the outside world. Even in a highly competitive market, a savvy concierge can promote the best of your outlets. They promote your special features ("our restaurant is perfect for a businessmen's lunch!") to their contacts and their colleagues and they take countless calls from the general public who seek their advice and recommendations.

To the Reservations Department, this means that they may further assist the guests by offering the concierge's service. The best way to conclude a reservation phone call is the offer of transferring the guest to the concierge for anything they might need during their stay.

To the guests, the concierge can make the difference between an average stay and an outstanding stay, whether it's business or pleasure. With the help of your Reservations Department to encourage incoming guests to contact the concierge before their stay, the concierge

will make sure that the guests' plans are arranged and confirmed before they even arrive. During their stay, they seek out the concierge for any further requests or information. A veteran concierge can really delight your guests, even with some of the simplest things, such as the perfect restaurant to match their tastes and occasion, or the perfect suggestion for where and how to entertain their children. Sometimes your guests need to turn to the concierge for more personal assistance. The guest who lost his wallet will receive experienced help in all of the necessary steps to report the credit cards, and filing the reports that help the guest continue his travel. The family who has just been informed of a death in their family needs help in changing all of their travel plans. Every concierge can share stories of some very touching moments they have unexpectedly shared with guests. These moments are defining moments for the hotel and the guest.

The role of the hotel concierge constantly expands as their relationship with every department in your property grows. The hotel concierge is more than just the "go to person." I recently heard a General Managers refer to his concierge team as "our heart and soul." I can't think of a better description of effectively understanding the role of the hotel concierge.

Leigh Anne Dolecki joined the hospitality industry after a 20 year career in the world of theatre production. Since becoming a concierge in 2000 she has served as Vice President of the Northern California Concierge Association. At the end of 2007 she completed her two year term as President of the NCCA. She represented a membership of over 160 concierges throughout the Bay Area as far south as Monterey and Carmel, and as far north as Healdsburg. As President, Ms. Dolecki provided educational opportunities for the members by planning meetings and events, as well as building relationships with service providers throughout northern California, keeping NCCA members on the forefront of guest services. She remains on the current Board of Directors as Past President. As a member of Les Clefs d'Or USA, Ms. Dolecki most recently attended the Pan American Congress in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the International Congress in Copenhagen as well as the National Congress in New York City. She has made numerous presentations on the Northern California Concierge Association's response to concierge outsourcing. Ms. Dolecki, Chef Concierge at Campton Place, a Taj Hotel, provides guest services. Located in downtown San Francisco, just off Union Square, the 110-room luxury boutique hotel is the third Taj Hotel in the United States along with The Pierre and the Taj Boston; it is also a member of The Leading Small Hotels of the World. Ms. Dolecki continues her work in the San Francisco Mayor's outreach program for the homeless, "Project Homeless Connect."