

### With All the Choices on the Internet, Why Do Guests Need a Concierge?

*By Elaine Oksner, Guest Service and Concierge Trainer, Hospitality Excellence, Inc.*

Reprinted with permission from [www.hotelexecutive.com](http://www.hotelexecutive.com)



The Concierge profession has changed over the years, but never more so than in this new century. Before the advent of the internet and other amazing technological tools, hotel guests used to rely on the concierge at their destination to orient them to their new surroundings and connect them with tourist destinations, specialized shopping, gourmet restaurants, business services and serve a myriad other needs. Twenty years ago, when I first started as a concierge in Washington, DC, concierges developed huge Rolodexes of contacts locally, nationally and internationally, in order to answer every request for help. We kept huge libraries of resources at our desks – telephone books, atlases, five inch thick guides to hotels around the world, a dictionary, and flight schedules for national and international travel, restaurant guides, an incredible amount of brochures on local attractions and so on --- almost all of which are now replaced by computer access.

Back then, when a new challenge was made to a concierge, it could sometimes take hours of telephone calls to research an answer. As the Chef

Concierge at the Park Hyatt Washington during the early 1990's, I remember getting a request from a VIP guest from the Middle East. He had read about a special cane that had laser beams. It was designed, he told me, for a blind person and emitted laser beams to sense the person's surroundings. He

wondered where he could purchase one for his father. Fortunately, I had other staff on duty so I could spend the time it took to make a long series of calls that took more than two and a half hours to finally get the gentleman the information. With computer access, it might have only taken minutes. However, with computer access, he might have searched out and found the information himself and not asked the concierge.

So, has this internet access changed the need for the concierge? It is a double- edged sword. Yes, the guest has computer access, but then, so does the concierge. So, since virtually everyone now has computer access, the question becomes, "Why do guests need a Concierge?" Is it time for hotels to replace the concierge with a computer and let the guests tap out their questions onto the information highway? It is a question a lot of hotel managers are asking. Chakitan Dev, a Cornell University Hotel School professor, was recently quoted in USA Today

as saying concierges are “going the way of the elevator operator” except at luxury properties.

There is no question that, due to the internet, many people are doing their own research prior to their arrival in a new city or resort. For example, they are making use of sites such as [Opentable.com](http://Opentable.com) or [Zagat.com](http://Zagat.com). to pick out their restaurants and, in the case of Opentable, actually making their own reservations and getting rebates for doing so. How does a concierge compete with that? Future guests also check out internet sites such as Where Magazine’s or even [Concierge.com](http://Concierge.com) to get information on potential sightseeing excursions or must-see museum exhibits, and even use websites book a tee times and reserve theater tickets. They are conversant with the websites of their favorite airlines, car rental providers, and have more than a nodding acquaintance with sites such as Orbit, [Expedia](http://Expedia) and [Travelocity](http://Travelocity). So why, then, are concierges as busy as ever at their desks? What is it that they are providing that the guests still need and come to expect from their concierge?

The answer is two-fold. First of all, and most importantly, they want someone with local, first hand knowledge; someone with the expertise, wisdom and experience to guide them in their new surroundings, to assist them in getting the best out of their trip. They are looking for insight, that special knowledge that the concierge loves to share with his or her guests. They are looking for help from the one person on the hotel staff that is truly designated to serve their needs and make their stay a memorable one. They are looking for someone to listen to them and understand what they are searching for, whether it’s a special place for a romantic dinner, a unique shop where they can find the antique cameo, the best spot for finding gorgeous sea shells, or even for the more mundane but essential things, like quickly getting a shoe repaired or a tooth capped. It is the human contact, the sympathetic ear, that makes the impact on the guest.

Concierges, like Jose Acevedo, Chef Concierge at the Fours Seasons Resort Palm Beach, have found that even guests who do a lot of research before they

arrive still have questions and, in fact, often have more questions than the ones who have shown up ready, willing and able to leave their itineraries in the concierge’s capable hands. Instead of suggesting a choice of two or three restaurants to meet the needs of an inquiring guest, Mr. Acevedo often finds himself responding to questions about five or ten eateries that the internet savvy guest has researched. The guest still wants the feedback of the on-site professional that they know and respect before they commit to making a decision.

In place of the Rolodexes of old, today’s concierges have built up in their in-house specialized computer system, a huge repository of information hundreds of times more complex and complete than what they could store only a decade ago. Systems such as ConciergeSmart, utilized by most of the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, allows the concierge to organize and edit their resources for quick and up-to-date answers to guests’ inquiries. You want a French restaurant within five miles of your hotel? The concierge can find it, call for reservations and print out a beautifully worded confirmation letter and perfect directions in less than a minute. Could there be a computer in the lobby to do that? Possibly, but would it know about the street construction that might call for an alteration in the driving directions? Would it know that the restaurant closes for the month of August or that it is closed just this week due to a family emergency? No. That is what the concierge is there for; the up-to-date, in-the-know, insight that helps the guest enjoy a stress-free trip and keeps that same guest coming back for repeat stays.

Second, and almost as important, the reason guests still use the concierge, despite the guests’ own prowess with the internet, is time, or the lack of it. Our guests are often juggling high profile careers and family responsibilities and have come to value what little free time they can find in their ultra-busy lives.

It can be excruciatingly time-consuming to do research on a computer, as many of our guests are finding out. They understand not only that their time is valuable, but they have learned that what they find on the information highway is not always accurate or

timely. All of us have heard the horror stories that guests have related to us about the hotel or inn in another country that they have booked on-line that looked so very charming on the web-site, only to be dirty, dilapidated and, sometimes, even dangerous. If only they had checked with a knowledgeable concierge, especially one with international connections, they could have saved themselves both time and grief. A professional concierge, who is a member of Les Clefs d'Or, recognizable by the crossed gold keys he or she wears on their uniform, has additional access to colleagues all over the world and can get accurate information through that network to avoid disappointments that come with false advertising on the "net".

Fortunately for today's travelers, most hotels offer internet access directly to the concierge, and the smart hotels and resorts advertise this fact to their guests. It should be standard procedure, of course that, when hotel reservations are made, part of the job of the reservationist is to advise guest of how to contact the concierge by telephone or E-mail. In fact, if there is ever any "down time" for the modern concierge, all he or she needs to do is check the e-mail. At most desks, it is incumbent on the concierge on duty to do regular hourly checks. This kind of contact with the guests is a big part of the concierge job now. Because of it, the smart traveler saves time and energy, and the concierge is working harder. And that is as it should be. Often most or a guest's entire itinerary is ready and waiting for him upon arrival, all done through chats with the concierge staff on line. The welcome letter from the concierge with the itinerary is a great way for the guest to ease into his stay and to get a great first impression of the property and it's commitment to his enjoyment of his visit.

As concierges have built up their computer skills and their information systems, hotel managers have found other ways to utilize and maximize the impact of the concierge staff. For example, many hotels, having updated and integrated their in-house restaurant reservation systems, have turned over the responsibility for taking those reservations to the concierge staff, a smart move that makes it easier for the concierge to sell the hotel's food outlets and make a sizeable impact on the F&B bottom line. Many other tasks have come to the concierge due to internet access. Printing out boarding passes and checking on flight departures and arrivals are now common practice. Following up on package shipping and lost luggage is also part of the daily work.

Printing out individualized driving directions and maps and even just finding zip codes are all some of the chores that the computer helps accomplish. And very few of them are things that the guest wants to have to do himself. At the upscale hotels, guests consider the concierge service something that is included in the hefty price of the room and are, and should be, very comfortable in giving the concierge both challenging and mundane tasks to do. The guest can relax while the concierge drives down that internet highway. As the internet, global positioning systems, and other technology lure guests into attempting to do all their travel planning on their own, guests truly need the concierge more than ever!

*Elaine Oksner is past President of Les Clefs d'Or, USA and former Chef Concierge at the Park Hyatt Washington and the Four Seasons Resort Palm Beach. She provides guest and concierge service training, consulting and development for Hospitality Excellence, Inc. She can be reached at 954-739-5299 or [eoaksner@hospitalityexcellence.com](mailto:eoaksner@hospitalityexcellence.com)*