

Local Knowledge - Global Reach: InterContinental Hotels & Resorts Uses Concierge Expertise to Market Brand

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In late 2006, InterContinental Hotels & Resorts (IHG) launched an "evolved brand positioning dedicated to providing local, authentic and enriching travel experiences to guests around the world". Who better to deliver this message but the chains' 1000 concierges, who were elevated to serve as "In the Know" brand ambassadors. In a recent letter to Robert Watson, Chief Concierge of InterContinental - The Willard, a leader of the rollout of the program, Steve Porter, President, The Americas, InterContinental Hotels Group, said, "...it is the impact and presence of you and your global concierge colleagues that have given our InterContinental brand the confidence to focus our position on 'In the Know' and to differentiate our brand on the foundation of our concierge service." In this article we will explore why InterContinental is spot on in identifying the professional hotel concierge as perfectly suited to this mission.

Company press releases emphasize validated research. Contemporary travelers in the luxury market are searching for a safe haven and are time-challenged. These guests seek unique, memorable and local experiences that reveal the culture of the country and city they are visiting. They want to capture the "Spirit of Place" - that magical intersection of culture, monuments, cuisine - which defines a locale without taking the time to read the great travel writers like Lawrence Durrell, Paul Theroux, Bill Bryson, or Evelyn Waugh. Who, within the hotel, could serve as the guides, filter the overload of information and tailor it to individual guests' desires and needs?

As industry professionals, you know that this research is not unique to InterContinental and the current "travel mantra" is one-of-a-kind, authentic experiences. When Simon Cooper, President and COO of Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, addressed the International Les Clefs d'Or Concierge Congress in Washington DC in January of 2006, he described the psychographic changes of the affluent travel consumer: "Guests want one-of-a-kind experiences. Create that immediate impact, that "wow" factor, for your guests and you guarantee repeat business for your hotel."

In an article entitled "Top Ten Luxury Travel and Lifestyle Trends for 2008," Hotelmarketing.com identified saving time as the greatest luxury in our 24/7 world. In addition, the author, Karen Weiner Escalera, observed that "Concierges are king. A lack of time and overload of

information for the affluent to sort through mean they will pay for an expert..."

Some hotel brands took aspects of the above information and decided to tap into it with more "do it yourself" solutions such as 24 hour internet access to a virtual concierge or providing hotel-generated lists of information to local attractions and events. InterContinental Hotels & Resorts, which has a portfolio of over 140 luxury hotels in 65 countries, went a step further by adding the human touch. They looked at their own staff and realized that their concierges had the neighborhood smarts and international contacts to curate this brand initiative.

Consider the following attributes of skilled professional hotel concierges:

1. Concierges are steeped in the traditions of hospitality and trace their beginnings to ancient times.
2. Concierges have longevity in their positions.
3. Concierges not only know the frequent guest, but they have also earned his trust. This repeat business often comes to the hotel because of the concierge.
4. Concierges learn the needs and desires of the hotel guests and regularly communicate this wisdom to upper management.
5. Concierges have near encyclopedic knowledge of the local scene.
6. Concierges are well connected both locally and internationally.
7. Concierges are often multilingual and most are well versed in many cultures.

This enduring hotel profession and its history merged perfectly with that of the InterContinental chain. InterContinental Hotels & Resorts is celebrating 62 years as the first truly international chain. Their hotels were established during the early days of civilian air travel immediately following WW II to serve emerging markets on the Pan American Airways routes. The first hotel was in Belem, Brazil and offered sanctuary to pioneer business entrepreneurs and adventurous leisure travelers. The current rebranding initiative was designed to recapture the spirit and glamor of discovering new places in the age of the Pan Am clippers and the Grand Hotels that were created to serve them. In the words of Jennifer Zeigler, SVP--Global Brand Management, "We want to celebrate experiencing something new with our guests and bring back a little of the golden age of travel and exploration that has always been part of our brand heritage."

Les Clefs d'Or, the International association of professional hotel concierges, is an old global network tracing its origins back to Paris, France in 1929. Originally the organization was established to help international travelers become "connected" to the local scene by speaking their languages and helping them acclimate to local customs and culture. After WW II it became apparent that by organizing across national boundaries they could also facilitate ongoing travel. Les Clefs d'Or has continued this tradition through the modern age and the network has grown to include 3500 members in 40 countries around the world.

The InterContinental group of professional concierges, counting many Clefs d'Or members in its ranks, was identified as having a deep determination to understand the needs and expectations of the typical customer and they became the ideal choice not only to deliver the message but also aid in its development. Subsequently, IHG created a multi-pronged strategy that involves an ongoing advisory process, hi-tech videos, print materials with local focus and training.

InterContinental established a Concierge Advisory Board and Concierge Academy and also regularly consults with Les Clefs d'Or. The Concierge Academy has held several meetings around the world and is now exploring the possibility of meeting in conjunction with Les Clefs d'Or annual national and international conferences which hosts many of the top chef concierges.

The hallmark of the program is the digital destination tours of each locale featuring the head concierge in a 2-3 minute film that give an overview of not-to-be-missed experiences. The content of the films is provided by each hotel's or resort's concierge team and contains genuine insider information. A visit to www.intercontinentalvideo.com introduces the guest to the chef concierge before his arrival on site. As well each video is hosted on the property page of each hotel on www.intercontinental.com.

The films are beautifully produced by TurnHere and because they feature real concierges rather than actors, they reinforce the message of authenticity. Once the guest books his reservation online, he receives a pop up email from the head concierge offering assistance in personalizing the visit. Currently IHG has 120 videos produced and they are still in production. Some properties are updating their videos to keep the content fresh and current. In the first year of measurement, from October 2006 to October 2007, the concierge website hosted 450,784 views.

Complementing the videos, the well-coordinated print collateral features colorful brochures on each property entitled "InterContinental Concierge." They provide local cultural tips such as "temple protocol" in the WELCOME TO BALI brochure as well as suggestions of what to see, where to eat, and shop. They have a map of the area and all prominently display the name of the head concierge.

Further, InterContinental Hotels & Resorts are using the concierges to help in the training of 40,000 of their brand colleagues across titles to engage guests and enable them to better understand and experience local destinations. This collegial engagement initiative is one of the largest and most expensive of its kind in the industry.

The InterContinental concierges are proud to be associated with a program of this caliber. They feel that their talents are being fully utilized by the company. Veteran concierges have commented on the recognition, increased morale of the team, and renewed respect of upper management. They are committed and engaged. Alexander Konig, IC Berchtesgaden, said, "So far the recognition to the new style of the website is very positive. If guests come to my desk they have already the maps printed out and the recommendations with them. So they are 'In the Know' before they come to the hotel!"

The service measurements have been impressive:

- Guest Satisfaction –Before and After:
- Quality of recommendations—jumped from 81% to 87%
- Ability to help guests discover the location— jumped 68% to 75%
- 9 out of 10 guests gave ratings of Excellent/Very Good

More travel and tourism organizations should look to this model of employee empowerment. InterContinental Hotels & Resorts has looked at a current trend and taken full advantage of the concierge skill set to help craft and deliver the company's message. They have creatively used technology to augment rather than replace the human touch. They have keyed into the concierges as roll models of service excellence and by their measurements, delivered greater guest experience success.

Marjorie Silverman is a former hotel concierge. She served as President of both Les Clefs d'Or USA, Ltd. and Union Internationale des Concierges d'Hotels "Les Clefs d'Or" (the first woman and first American). She advises the international organization as a member of the Conseil des Sages. To learn more about Les Clefs d'Or, visit the websites www.lcdusa.org and www.uichlesclefsdor.org You may contact Ms. Silverman by email at marjoriesilverman@mac.com