

Double Crossed...and Lovin' It

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By *Marion Edward*

SPECIAL REPORT -- "Getting the crossed keys pinned on your lapel is the ultimate honor for the professional concierge," states Shujaat Khan, President, Les Clefs d'Or (pronounced lay clay door) USA. Established in 1929 as an international organization of professional Hotel concierges, the heritage of the name and the gold keys reflect early centuries of service in France when the keys were literally used to guide travelers into darkened dining halls, palaces and hostelrys needing a "comte des cierges" or keeper of the candles.

Though electricity first transformed the nature of the hotel business, and later the onslaught of technological innovation, nothing replaces the tangible benefits gained from having a true concierge on staff. More than ever, guest service is a much-needed commodity, and LCD members live their slogan "In Service Through Friendship."



However, many hotels simply don't know how to deliver true concierge service, something Les Clefs d'Or can assist with. Explaining specific guest service initiatives, Shujaat Khan, Head Concierge, The Capital Hilton in Washington DC, offers a review of LCD's actionable alliances and networking:

"The Caribbean is such a hot place as a tourist destination, but they have really been behind in terms of service levels...that's what we had heard from people. In cooperation with Holly Stiel, Island Video Guide and Caribbean Escapes, LCD Board of Directors produced a training video, workbook and conducted a series of workshops on "The Art of the Concierge". With the assistance of Miguel Pena, a team of LCD Trainers - Marjorie Silverman, Maurice Dancer and Elizabeth Wilson have conducted training classes in Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia and the Bahamas. Shujaat Khan conducted sessions in St. Barth, St. Maarten, Antigua, and Anguilla for tourism and hotel management and staff. In Antigua, "The Department of Tourism attended and participated in sessions," states Khan.

Khan explains the training program's first portion comes with a video and workbook focused on service issues...After the morning session, the group goes for lunch...In the afternoon, they get specific about the "concierge"

LCD is conducting the sessions at no charge to individuals functioning as concierges. The training classes are open to hotels that are members of their local hotel associations. Employees of member hotels are invited to attend classes held one day each for a maximum of 25 students per class. Topics addressed include: Making the Impossible Possible, The Desire to Serve, Networking to Meet Client Needs, Acquiring Knowledge of "The Best" and The Concierge Professional

Khan shares quintessential guest service hot topics:

1. "Make It Happen" Thinking and the Power of Yes

"When you go to work, go with the mindset that you are going to say yes to things that are legal and moral. Yes is such a powerful word in our industry! We are here to serve, to serve our guests. The word, yes, is so powerful because it immediately calms the customer. When the customer listens, you can make a valiant effort to provide the service he or she seeks."

Re: challenges and roadblocks. "Create relationships within your own hotel so you have ready hands to help when

needed. Avoid the “it’s not my job” philosophy. Recognize there are some challenges you cannot overcome.

2. “Wings of No”

No can be said with “wings”. Role-playing explores the four characteristics of **No**:

1. Empathy: Let the guest know you understand.
2. Provide an alternative. Instead of saying: “No, Mr. Smith, I’m really sorry we couldn’t,” add: “However, I have found you an alternative just as good.” You give the guest an alternate option, and Khan says: “You have used the wings of no to make it fly.”
3. Cultivate the art of apology. We all have to be able to apologize because things do happen. In the apology, there are six key ingredients: actively listen; acknowledge the guest’s feelings; apologize; take action; appreciate; send an amenity.

• Writing guest directions

Although Khan and most American concierges have a reference book at their desks, Khan comments: “None of the concierge desks in the islands have written directions...” When Khan polled the Caribbean concierges during the training sessions, he discovered 60% rent cars; 90% call for directions and majority get lost.

Khan noticed all concierges in the Caribbean were hesitant to use written directions. He therefore conducted a snowflake experiment... Giving everyone a piece of paper, Khan told directions once: fold in half; tear left corner; fold again, tear bottom right corner; fold again. fold up right; open... The lesson: people didn’t follow directions and that’s why Khan believes guests need written directions. How do you know guests are listening? To be certain, Khan says, “Give written directions to the guest.” The process involves writing directions; have hotel staff actually drive the directions to see how it feels. Once all that is done to everyone’s satisfaction, directions are ready to distribute.

1. Restaurant recommendations

Khan states: “Having a restaurant list with menus is key to helping the guest... In a few moments, you can determine guest interest after first introducing your hotel’s restaurants. Since you can’t drag the conversation on for a half hour, know questions to gauge guest preferences.”

Khan recommends: “Observe if the guest is with his family, wife, or girlfriend. I start off with Continental cuisine... After recommending your own hotel’s restaurant, you can inquire about guest preferences. The guest’s answer will eliminate 50% of the market. Then, check with guest preferences for attire... You’ll eliminate further selections. Your choices will be narrowed within a minute. Show menus and your guest will be good to go.”

1. FAQs

Every hotel has these. What are some of the questions asked of you? Sit down and make a list of the things people ask 100 times. Go back to your hotel and put together a three to four page document with answers to these. Goal: provide consistency...

2. Psychic Salary

Khan states: “When we provide service, as service professionals, we get a certain amount of satisfaction out of it besides getting paid in dollars. I am paying myself in satisfaction I get from providing the service-some days more-some days less. If by any chance you are not getting a psychic salary, it is time for you to get out. You should find another business... That’s what is a driving force for many of us.”

None of us are getting paid for the Caribbean training programs... we are even losing money! Why am I doing this? For the psychic salary and sharing my knowledge and strength with my colleagues, hoping they are going to learn something from my experience and improve themselves.” Khan is candid: “I like to help a family... I have two sons myself and know how it is when your family has a good time. Khan welcomes your enquiry into learning more about our training program. Feel free to send him an email at president@lcdusa.org

Khan believes there are two big strengths each concierge should possess: being able to complete an impossible job (“The Devil Wears Prada” comes to mind) and the power of networking.

3. The Impossible Job. . .Completing It

To complete an impossible job, you need to think on your feet. Khan recalls that a guest came in from downtown one evening. He was scheduled to participate in a court hearing the next morning. He had left his file in the trunk of the cab. Khan was approached to see if he could offer assistance in locating the cab. Khan thought about the situation. It was dark so that guest did not have any idea about the driver; nor did the guest recall any music or conversation. But Khan observed the guest said the driver was listening to a sports radio station. “A pulse went to my head,” Khan commented. . .Khan immediately called the sports radio stations and 15 minutes later, the driver returned to the Capital Hilton with the client’s file.

Khan admits, “I could have said, sorry but with the information you’ve given me, it’s very hard to proceed.” As a result, Khan happily says: “That was actually fantastic. . . .sometimes you get lucky.”

4. The Power of Networking

“Networking is of our strongest traits,” says Khan. “With 3,200 members around the world, we’re far apart but still so close.” The close-knit network reminded Khan of another story: “One night a guest came up to my desk, dejected he could not return home because of work. The next day was his twelfth wedding anniversary. He lived in a small village outside Rome. The guest wanted to send roses with a singing telegram to his wife.” Khan recalled: “In Rome it was already 9 PM at night. The job needed to be done by tomorrow morning.”

Khan asked for 30 minutes to research the challenge. “I went to my international contact list, located someone who would be on duty now in Rome. He recognized the name of someone he had met at a recent Congress. I called him and told him what I needed. He replied he’d call back shortly. I got the cost and was advised that with an authorized credit card, the message and flowers would be delivered. I advised the guest of the procedure and stated, “If you agree, please sign here.” The next day I called to make sure it had been delivered. . . This is the power of networking in LCD. No matter where you are I can call to deliver a service!”

5. Future of the Concierge

“The concierge provides the human touch; the guest will always need personalized service,” concludes Khan. “The world of concierge is going to get stronger and the need for human service will never be taken over by any technology. The need for concierge service is as constant as the Northern Star and a good concierge desk, ultimately elevates the guest experience.”

From the beginning, LCD’s motto has been “In service through friendship”. That motto has translated to the group’s humanitarian volunteer work that has been prevalent as recently as projects with Habitat for Humanity and Katrina relief work. Additionally, The Les Clefs d’Or Foundation, assists its own membership should catastrophic illness or disasters render them unable to work. With 39 countries and approximately 3,200 members worldwide, LCD concierges continually educate themselves through daily encounters and experiences in their home cities and countries, to broaden and enhance their knowledge, understanding and contacts worldwide, all in an effort to provide the best possible service to guests while providing added value to their hotels.