

Concierges go extra mile in Internet age

RECENT INITIATIVES BY SOME HOTELS

InterContinental

The luxury brand has launched an "In The Know" program that provides incoming guests with online destination videos and Internet communication with a concierge at their hotel. The company is providing additional training for concierges and encouraging them to share their local knowledge with guests. InterContinental Vice President David Anderson says today's guests are "more global, extremely savvy and streetwise. They're very astute and picky about what they want."

Holiday Inn

This year, it implemented a virtual concierge service, eHost, that guests can use in their rooms at all North American hotels. Guests use the hotels' free high-speed Internet connections to access the virtual concierge, which provides around-the-clock information about restaurants, attractions, events, movies, shopping and transportation.

Loews

The luxury chain has its own "In The Know" program. Concierges each week come up with a list of local tips and share them with front-desk staff and porters, who then pass along the tips to guests. Porters are supposed to provide the tip when delivering bags to a guest after check-in.

Marriott

Its extended-stay brand, TownePlace Suites, plans to put an 8-foot-high, 8-foot-wide map marked with restaurants and local places of interest on the lobby walls of all 128 hotels by next June, spokesman John Wolf says.

Starting next year, all Marriott brands will give guests pocket guides and two-sided cards with local information. The pocket guides list items such as the nearest Starbucks, gas station, post office, "great restaurant with local flavor" and provide directions to tourist attractions. Marriott's two-sided cards include a map of local streets and guide people on walking tours.

Hyatt

With the goal of upgrading local information, Hyatt this month will launch a website that lets members of its frequent-stay program chat with concierges and other travelers.

Last year, Hyatt established E-Concierge, an e-mail service that links guests to concierges and lets them book local activities or restaurants before they arrive.

By Gary Stoller

hotel guests want "meaningful and memorable experiences" that allow them to forget terrorism, airport hassles and the Iraq War. "They're taking shorter trips, so those two to three days away better be special," she says.

Origins in luxury

Concierge service began in the late 1970s, when luxury hotels in the USA copied their European counterparts. Many other hotels not in the luxury category — particularly those in big cities and resort areas — have since established information desks. They've become invaluable to frequent travelers such as Robin Kruk, 47, of Racine, Wis.

She travels frequently with her husband, John, and says their "primary reason for travel is to see and experience things we do not have at home. We are not interested in just the typical tourist experience with generic results. We want something different and memorable."

Before flying to a destination, Kruk contacts the hotel concierge to get recommendations. "As a result, we have had wonderful, customized trips."

The concierge staff at the Sheraton (HOT) in Rio de Janeiro directed her to a local samba club and to "delicious" barbecue restaurants where no one spoke English. In Austin, the Hyatt concierge "recommended some wonderful driving trips, including a visit to historical towns like Smithville."

Jodie McMahon, 52, of Lenexa, Kan., says staff at the Comfort Suites (CHH) in Carlisle, Pa., directed her to a fabulous restaurant that served Civil War-era foods when she told them she was headed to Gettysburg.

"Pickled watermelon rinds sounded awful but were amazing," she says.

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

Adjusting to a new wave of Internet-age travelers in search of unique and authentic travel experiences, hotels are revolutionizing their information desks.

High-end brands are upgrading concierge operations and training staffs to improve their neighborhood knowledge. Other brands are looking for better ways to share information with guests electronically about local restaurants, events and attractions.

Marriott's (MAR) TownePlace Suites, for example, has put large maps on lobby walls marked with recommended restaurants and attractions. Management makes recommendations with input from guests who have been to the places. Courtyard by Marriott later this year will roll out at Fairfax, Va., its first "Go Board," a flat-panel HDTV with local information, including restaurant recommendations, for guests.

At Loews, the 18-hotel luxury chain, the new "In The Know" program calls on concierges each week to come up with a list of local tips. They share them with front-desk staff and porters, who then pass along the tips to guests. Porters are supposed to provide the tips when delivering bags for guests after check-in.

"Every brand is working on ways to deliver local knowledge," says Marriott's John Wolf. "Hotels must not only figure out how to get local knowledge in the hands of employees and train them to deliver it, but also how to provide local knowledge that is relevant to guests' needs."

Hotel experts say guests have become more knowledgeable about their destinations because of the Internet and the growing number of information sources. They want to escape from the harsher post-9/11 world and better connect with the places they're visiting and the people who live there. They want experiences that provide lasting memories and give them something to brag about at cocktail parties.

"Guests are looking for whatever it is that makes Detroit Detroit," says Michelle Lapierre, Marriott's senior director of customer relationship marketing. "There's a desire to say, 'I caught a little slice of that.'"

Roberta Nedry, president of Hospitality Excellence, which provides concierge and guest service training for hotels and other clients, says

Kelly Nelson, a concierge at the New York Marriott Marquis, says a guest this year asked for assistance in creating a special night because he planned to propose to his girlfriend later that day. She spread rose petals in their room, delivered champagne and recommended a romantic restaurant in a carriage house formerly owned by Aaron Burr. It worked. The girlfriend said yes.

Michael Fox, a concierge at Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel, says guests frequently request a restaurant where they can dine next to Hollywood stars. A few weeks ago, he sent a couple to a trendy Beverly Hills restaurant where Michael Bolton and Nicollette Sheridan were dining, and they said it was the highlight of their stay.

Meanwhile, hotels are awakening to the business power of their concierges and information desks. They say that inside tips about unique restaurants, shops, attractions and events create memorable "experiences" that can instill brand loyalty, making guests want to return to the hotel or recommend it to others.

Concierges can influence guests' spending decisions, directing them to spas, restaurants or other services within a hotel, says Sara Kearney, Hyatt's vice president of sales and marketing. Concierges can also collect information about guest preferences and spending patterns, and share it with other staff for marketing strategies. "Concierges can make or break your visit," Kearney says, "and they've been an underestimated source of revenue in the past."

Some hotels — particularly luxury ones — are adding concierge staff or supplying them with better computer hardware, software or Internet databases. Some are increasing the training of concierges and front-desk personnel, contracting companies to provide local information or requiring staff to regularly come up with new, local recommendations.

Many non-luxury hotels now realize their guests are not getting top-quality local information and are trying to raise their standards, says Maurice Dancer, president of Les Clefs d'Or USA, the only national organization of hotel lobby concierges. "They're fighting to be the best information provider. It's a delight for the guest."

Trying to steer guests to such local finds, a growing number of hotels are setting up virtual concierge systems — online services that give guests 24-hour access to information normally provided by a concierge. Many have been installed in hotels that haven't had a human concierge or an information desk, says Bjorn Hanson, an industry analyst at PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Internet vs. job security

Whether sophisticated information technology could ultimately lead to the demise of the traditional concierge position is a matter of some disagreement in the hospitality industry. Neither the government nor the industry tracks employment numbers.

Joan Cronson, a spokeswoman for Carlson Hotels Worldwide, which has the Radisson brand, says the number of concierge positions appears to be decreasing because of the "power of the Internet" and the rise of "self-sufficient" travelers who know how to use the Internet and are knowledgeable about their destinations.

About one-fifth of the 200-plus Radisson hotels in North and South America have concierges. Carlson partnered with travel advice provider 10Best.com, and began posting on its hotels' websites five years ago the best local restaurants and attractions. The hotels also feature staff picks based on employees' knowledge of the area.

Except at upscale hotels, the concierge "is going the way of the elevator operator," says Chekitan Dev, a Cornell University hotel school professor. "Owners and operators of midmarket and down-market hotels can no longer justify offering the service of a concierge," he says, because plenty of information is available on the Internet, and "good concierges are hard to find, hard to keep and expensive."

David Cranage, a professor at Penn State's hospitality management school, suggests that hotels' new moves to deliver information without a concierge staff may be akin to banks, a quarter-century ago, adding ATMs and, in some cases, discouraging the use of tellers by charging fees.

Customers initially were unhappy with less personal communication, and banks reversed their policies, he says. But people became more accustomed to using ATMs, and they have become the preferred way of banking. Similarly, hotel guests may use a concierge less as they become more accustomed to using the Internet and other online services for their information.

But Nedry, the guest-service trainer, and Dancer, the concierge association president, say hotels' moves to provide better local information are increasing the number of concierges. Guests at four- and five-star hotels feel that concierges are an integral part of what they are paying for, says Dancer, a concierge at The Pierre in New York. Many guests do Internet research, then ask him whether they made the right restaurant or entertainment decision. Dancer predicts that, within the next five years, many big-city luxury hotels will have concierges on duty 24 hours per day.

Hotel executive Elizabeth Pizzinato, whose Four Seasons chain has had around-the-clock concierges for years, says the Internet age has done nothing to diminish the importance of concierges.

Hotel guests "are looking for the new, the unusual and the unexpected," she says. "Everybody is short of time, and the concierge is more important than ever."