

The CONCERGE

Key to Hospitality

A Training Manual McDOWELL BRYSON and ADELE ZIMINSKI

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McDowell Bryson & Adele Ziminski



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P R E F A C E

This is the first textbook ever written on the intricacies of the concierge profession. In Europe, there has been a long tradition of concierge work, with training taking the form of an extended apprenticeship program. Any formal training has concentrated on the teaching of languages and has been combined with actual on-the-job training.

In the United States, there has been, and is still, very little understanding of the role the concierge can and should play in the daily operation of a hotel or resort. At its best, concierge work is a profession, and the concierge is a quality employee who could be promoted to more important positions. The concierge can be the key to hospitality. Of all the staff in the hotel, he or she is the one who has the most personal contact with the guests. A well-trained concierge can be the reason why guests return again and again, and can embody the quality of service that makes a hotel's reputation.

In order to be a first-class concierge, one must have a thorough understanding not only of the operation of the hotel, but also of the businesses of the outside vendors who provide services used by hotel guests. Americans are not geared to the long wait demanded by the apprenticeship system before they can participate in the job of their choice. A good concierge training program makes it possible for students and employees to go directly into an appropriate job as a valuable and knowledgeable staff member.

This text, which is based on our years of concierge experience, describes the daily functions of the concierge and how to perform them. It also is a valuable tool for students who hope to own their own restaurant, limousine service, or other business that relies on the hotel concierge for referrals. Anyone involved in the hospitality industry can profit from a sophisticated knowledge of who the concierge is, and what he or she does for the hotel and its guests.

We have made every effort to present our material in a user-friendly fashion, and we hope this book will prove to be a valuable supplementary text for the study of hotel operations. We hope also that students will find it easy to read and understand, and will refer to it when they have real jobs in the real world. We assure our readers that the material in this book reflects the situations that we and our colleagues have encountered on a daily basis as concierges.



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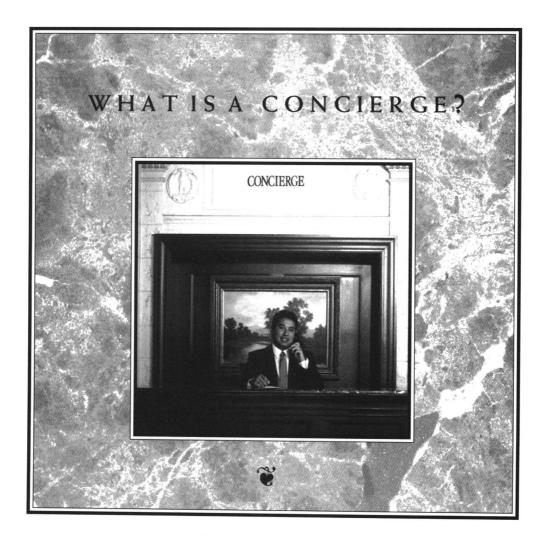
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CHAPTER 1



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he derivation of the word "concierge" is uncertain. Some theorize that it comes from the Latin "conservus," meaning "fellow slave." Others claim that the first concierge (Comte des Cierges, "Count of the Candles") was in charge of Paris's royal prison, the Conciergerie, where Marie Antoinette was kept before being taken to the guillotine.

Whatever its origin, for the last hundred years or so the term has also been applied to uniformed hotel employees who have their own counter in the lobby. A concierge is a separate entity from the reception staff, room clerks, and cashiers.

History of the Concierge

Until 1936 concierges were not employees of the hotel but independent entrepreneurs who purchased their positions from the hotel and who paid the salaries, if any, of the uniformed subordinates under them. When the legendary Ferdinand Gillet opened Paris's Hotel Scribe in 1926, he had eighty uniformed men and boys in his employ. Now, with the telephone, FAX, and other improvements in communications services, such a large staff is no longer a necessity.

There is very little systematic information available regarding the concierge's job. What there is usually takes the form of magazine articles glorifying the unusual and challenging requests (which tend to be interesting) while ignoring the drudgery. They appear periodically in various slick magazines whose writers focus on the person or persons that particular author thinks epitomize the profession. All have basically said that the concierge is the most important employee of the hotel, and can provide anything one can ask for as long as it's neither immoral nor illegal. This is, of course, slightly exaggerated. All concierges have failures and make mistakes. But the basic idea is sound. The one theme that most writers have emphasized is the difficulty of defining the concierge's job. A concierge can provide a wide range of services for guests while also playing many roles on behalf of the hotel's manage-

ment. If there is anything a guest needs or has a problem with, the concierge is the person to call. Concierges almost always help, either by taking action themselves or by knowing exactly to whom to refer the guest. In this sense, the concierge provides a backup for such departments as housekeeping and security.

Since the comparison is constantly made, it cannot be overemphasized that the European concierge is the product of a very different system from that of the American concierge. The European concierge's history is much longer, and the training is far different. European concierges also work with a professionalism and a devotion to the job that is almost unknown in this country. Their system of contacts with the purveyors of goods and services has never been equaled here and would be frowned upon by the managers of most American hotels, who might question whether the choice of vendors should benefit the guest or the concierge staff. Sometimes a great deal of both money and favors is exchanged in order to maintain the contacts and provide the services.

The European Concierge

The European concierge system is based on the apprenticeship system—a system that hasn't lasted well in most American businesses. One started at a young age and worked at a menial task, perhaps as a groom. With experience, he or she would gradually be promoted to better and better jobs (chasseur, voiturier, liftier, postier, bagagiste, huissier, assistant night concierge), leading eventually to assistant concierge, concierge, and finally, Chef (Chief) Concierge. The responsibilities of such a job can be considerable and sometimes include managing the entire uniformed lobby staff. Aside from their skills in managing lower-level employees, many of the reigning concierges in Europe have made a practice of learning, on their own, the many facets of fine living in order to understand more of their guests' needs. Some of the newer breed have attended the European hotel schools, which are famous worldwide for training into management positions rather than specifically for concierge work.



All concierges have stories to tell of their fabulous achievements and miraculous accomplishments. While some of these are undoubtedly true, many have certainly been embroidered upon. The daily workload is not always quite so glamorous and actually varies little from country to country. Most requests of a concierge fall into a limited number of categories: restaurant and limousine reservations, theater tickets, directions to almost anything or any place. Handing out maps, tracing lost luggage, and dispensing lots of advice are part of what makes up the overall scene of orderly confusion to be found around any concierge desk.

Incomes, like many of the exploits of the concierges, are known mainly as items of gossip. Although salary data is not easily obtained from European concierges, some have mentioned that a good concierge should earn two to three times his or her salary in tips and commissions. Very few concierges in the United States are paid a high salary, so the addition of tips and commissions will make it comparable only to the income of the average executive secretary.

The American Concierge

The American concierge in most large Eastern cities, like New York and Washington, performs somewhat the same duties as the European concierge, although generally concierges in the United States deal much more with the average business guest rather than with world travelers. Thus, the need for foreign language skills is much less and there are fewer problems of nearby national borders to be crossed by hotel guests. The concierge is seldom in charge of lobby activities and staff, and so American concierges are generally not trained to supervise. They usually report to a mid-level supervisor and cannot function with the degree of independence found in Europe. Because no schools offer formal training in concierge work, and the apprenticeship system is absent in the United States, concierges in pursuit of excellence here lack the opportunity to acquire all the skills of their European counterparts. This may change, as some hotel management begins to perceive concierge service as an edge in highly competitive times. On the other hand, there is

always the question of cost versus benefits, and among some of the chains there is a trend toward saving costs by combining concierge duties with other front desk staff.

Having considered the problems of inadequate training, somewhat limited income, and less freedom to perform, one might wonder why the position of concierge has any allure in the United States. The rewards for all concierges, both here and abroad, are primarily those of having done a task particularly well. In a sense, this type of work appeals to the person who truly enjoys doing things for people. It must be pointed out that, considering the job requirements in the United States, the monetary rewards can be considered substantial, but they are seldom the first consideration, and they are frequently limited to the larger cities and then to the luxury hotels and resorts.

Some hotel managers have been known to say that "concierges are born, not trained," referring to the particular motivation of a good concierge to do the job well and to please both guest and management. These managers have hit upon the crux of defining who will make the best concierges. In fact, a frequently heard complaint from American concierges is that the guests aren't demanding enough—the challenges aren't hard enough. This contributes to the large turnover and the general air of dissatisfaction in many American hotels. The concierges keep moving while they try to find those necessary challenges and the accompanying rewards.

A great hotel, regardless of its location, is famous because of its service. All of the hospitality industry's indicators show that although the 1990s may be the decade of downsizing, it will also be a time to emphasize service and to focus on repeat business. A careful survey of industry publications will show that the amount of space devoted to articles on new and better ways to provide service to guests is increasing rapidly. Much of what is being said is not new; it seems new because management has only recently begun to realize the value of proper service as a marketing tool. Basic good service has always been available at the really good hotels. Although many American travelers are willing to settle for what they can get rather than demanding what they really want, there is always a market for the finer things in life. The people who make a profession of knowing about and pro-



viding the luxuries available are the concierges, who hold the key to service, repeat business, and subsequent greater profits for the hotels.

Qualifications of a Concierge

Since there is no apprenticeship program in this country, the prior life experience and formal education of the concierge are of paramount importance. Concierges should be mature enough to inspire confidence since their guests may be trusting them with confidential personal matters, important business deals, or plans of a personal nature. The more sophisticated concierges are, the better they will fit in with and understand the needs of their guests. Guests always prefer someone they consider more of an equal, someone who has a knowledge of business and of the demands made upon the guests, because they are traveling in order to conduct business. These guests currently make up the predominant number of people serviced by the concierge. Although large cities may have millions of tourists, they seldom make substantial use of the concierge's talents.

Enthusiasm must be a primary ingredient in the concierge's personality. Whether describing the process of chartering a yacht or selling tickets to a bus tour, the concierge should make the guests feel that they have made a wise decision. One must be able to be cheerful while answering the same questions over and over during the course of the day, and must make each guest feel as though the question is important. The concierge who develops a contemptuous attitude toward tourists looking for the hotel's bathrooms is in the wrong profession.

Organization and efficiency form the basis of effective operations. Since several concierges may work the desk during different shifts, accurate record-keeping is a must. Log books for tickets, limousines, flowers and babysitters must be kept up to date or chaos can result.

Sensitivity to the feelings of others is another important asset. To succeed as a concierge, you have to be constantly attentive to the other person; you have to listen to and look carefully at your guests.

Unfortunately, not everyone who enters the concierge profession possesses the

quality of honesty. Tales abound of concierges who have pocketed tips meant for others, marked up theater tickets at an illegal rate, or worked "deals" with restaurateurs or limousine companies. Where cash is present, temptation will be also. There is no quicker way of losing the respect of one's colleagues (or one's job) than by being dishonest.

Command of foreign languages is important, but should not be overemphasized. Whereas, if you know several languages, you will always find reason to use them, many concierges function quite well without them. Many foreign business travelers and tourists are very proud of their knowledge of English and relish the opportunity to practice it. In the event of a real communications problem, the hotel staff will normally have employees who speak almost all of the required languages. Many hotels boast anywhere from 40 to 60 various languages among their staff.

Concierges are often on their feet all day long so stamina is vital. After work, the concierge might try new restaurants, attend a show, or have a meeting with colleagues. Long days are not uncommon.

Discretion is of the essence. Concierges often know intimate details of their guests' lives. *Toutvoire, rien dire* (see everything, say nothing) must be your motto. You will win the confidence of your guests by displaying respect for their privacy.

A warm and friendly personality, the ability to learn how to do research, a knowledge of the business world, and that mysterious psychological need to help people, are the major requirements for the beginner who wants to be a concierge. The rest can be learned through a combination of on-the-job training, formal training in various fields, and, most importantly, an ongoing self-education program.

Opportunities for Advancement

Different types of properties require different types of concierges. Ambition takes many forms, and while one may have heard the legends of concierges who have been in their jobs for twenty-five or thirty years, it does not mean that these professionals are not ambitious. Their ambition has not taken the form of moving up the chain of command or out of the profession; it has taken the form of self-improvement—



always becoming better and more knowledgeable at their jobs. However, one should be aware that this is not the only direction that one's ambition can take. One can also choose to move into other areas of hotel management.

There is no better position from which to observe the operation of the entire hotel than that of the concierge. Concierges are in an opportune position to hear all of the guests' comments about what they like about the hotel and what causes them problems. Working with all of the various departments to solve these problems allows the observant concierge to develop an overview of the inner working of the property that no other single position offers. Concierges share with top management the unique viewpoint of needing all of the departments to function optimally so that they can do their best work. You are not competing with any other department in order to prove your merit; you are actually trying to help every department do its job better. Employees at the reception desk, in the engineering department, the food and beverage areas, and marketing are not so fortunate. They don't share the top management's view of the hotel, and their workload causes them to focus on their own departments almost exclusively.

The concierge's background makes it easy to take the next step: choosing which of the many departments is of the most interest and asking for a transfer in order to learn the intricacies and details of its daily operations. Obviously, there are departments where a previous formal background is essential. You cannot go from being a concierge to being a chef unless you are a qualified cook. You can, however, become a Maitre d' or train to become a room service manager. Housekeeping can also be a desirable next step and, as a concierge, you should already have a good overview of this area because of your experience in making room inspections and showing rooms to guests. If you have worked on a concierge level, you will have worked very closely with the housekeeping management. Moving to the security department is also relatively easy. A good concierge works in tandem with the security officers on a daily basis and has quite a good understanding of the basics of their responsibilities. Since in the process of performing the normal round of duties