

Chapter 1

Personal Concierge

Concierges have been around in one form or another for centuries, but the personal concierge burst onto the scene only in the late 1990s. Today, more people have less time for everyday tasks, and many of them rely on personal concierges for everything from walking the dog to getting dinner on the table. There are few tasks a personal concierge won't tackle, as long as the chore is legal, of course.

Although personal concierge services really just came about in the last decade, the number of companies that serve time-starved clients is mushrooming, right along with customer demand for such businesses. One San Francisco-based concierge business saw its client base double in 2002 and continued to grow up to 50 percent annually for several years after that. Some 2,000 miles away, a Chicago concierge firm that began with 25 clients in 2003 grew to serve more than 85 clients in just a couple of years.

In this chapter, we'll explore the new trend toward personal concierge services as well as the history of the concierge profession.

We'll also introduce you to several entrepreneurs who've started their own personal concierge services and hear from several former concierges who are now consultants. You'll benefit from their experience and advice as we look into the personal concierge industry. In the next chapter, we'll cover the same kind of information for personal shopping.

Meet And Greet

Before we go any further, let's meet the personal concierges featured in this book as well as the concierge experts who share their know-how.



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Fun Fact

The word concierge may scare some people because it seems like such a fancy word. Plus, how the heck do you say it? OK, on three: kon'se erz. There, that wasn't so bad, was it? If you want a good laugh, just ask a concierge how many variations of the pronunciation he or she has heard.

- **Cynthia Adkins** was a hotel concierge from 1989 until 1998. She started her own concierge business in 1997 while still working part time at a hotel. Today, her business, Concierge at Large, is a corporate concierge company located in San Diego.
- **Kim Macaulay** founded It's a Matter of Time in 2004 in Denver after 10 years as a corporate headhunter.
- **Ed and Chantal Boxer** are a husband/wife concierge team that founded Fini Concierge in Boston. He left a career in real estate, and she left a nonprofit organization to start their business in 2004.

Our experts include Katharine Giovanni, author of several business books, including *The Concierge Manual* (Newroad Pub), and the co-founder of a concierge consulting firm called Triangle Concierge Inc. in Wake Forest, North Carolina. She first started a concierge company in 1995 then transitioned into a consulting company in 1998.

Additional insight is provided by Jeanette Clarey, who started a corporate concierge company in Minnesota in 1995, then transformed it into a consulting service to corporations in 1998. Her company offers turnkey consulting programs for companies looking to establish their own on-site concierge services for employees.

We also spoke with Holly Stiel, who has

owned a multimedia company called Stiel Media in Mill Valley, California, since 1990 and who teaches the “art of customer service” to aspiring and existing concierges.

The Demand Keeps Rising

One reason more people are using the services of personal concierges is that their free time is fading away faster than ever. As a rule, most of us have less personal time than in years past. How many times have you heard the refrain “There just aren't enough hours in the day”? Hence, the demand for helpers to run errands for us. More than ever, families include two full-time wage earners, and even many teenagers hold down part-time jobs. Who will get dinner on the table, pick up the dry cleaning, get the dog groomed, and make sure the lawn gets mowed on a regular basis if everyone is at work? Can you say “concierge”?

According to Sara-ann Kasner, president and founder of the National Concierge Association (NCA), “It used to be that people associated concierge services with a high-end hotel or residential property—a privilege of the wealthy. In today's world, with both parents in the workplace for long hours, having a concierge service take care of entertainment and personal needs has become not just an amenity but a necessity. The [concierge] industry has expanded to include every facet of the average person's social, personal and work life.”

Although it's no secret that the personal concierge field is booming, solid numbers are hard to pin down. The NCA, founded in Dallas in 1998 as an international networking and resource organization for concierge professionals, doesn't yet track statistics, although the organization has grown to approximately 600 members worldwide.

The International Concierge and Errand Association (ICEA) was founded in 2001 with 12 members and five years later has more than 400 members. According to ICEA

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executive director Carla Mandell, concierge services are becoming more niche-based, offering targeted services aimed at a particular group's lifestyle.

"Those living in vacation areas tend to market their services to those with second homes," says Mandell. "They'll offer services designed to help manage the home while the client is away." Other niches Mandell points to include bachelors or seniors.

Cynthia Adkins, the corporate concierge in San Diego, estimates there are more than 20,000 personal concierge companies throughout the United States, along with thousands of hotel concierges. Everyone seems to agree that the number of personal concierges continues to grow and grow.

Ancient Roots

Although more and more people are becoming familiar with the term "concierge," very few know where this customer-service-based profession originated. The word "concierge" evolved from the French *comte des cierges*, the "keeper of the candles," a term that referred to the servant who attended to the whims of visiting noblemen at medieval castles. Eventually, the name "concierge" came to stand for the keepers of the keys at public buildings, especially hotels. There is even a famous prison in Paris that is called The Conciergerie, in honor of the warden who kept the keys and assigned cells to the inmates.

Service personnel known as concierges first showed up in some luxury hotels in Europe in the 1930s. Then, as now, their duties were to welcome and assist guests throughout their stay. Naturally, guests didn't have as many options or services as they do today. Traditionally, the better hotels mostly employed male concierges. Today, there are as many female as male concierges in the United States, although in Europe the concierge industry remains predominantly male.

Defining Moment

To fully understand the industry, it's important to make the distinction between hotel, corporate and personal concierges.

Hotel concierges are employed by hotels to assist guests by arranging tours, making dinner reservations, offering advice on shopping or sightseeing, and taking care of other needs that may arise during their stay. At this time, only hotel concierges may become members of the elite Les Clefs d'Or (pronounced "lay clay door"), a 53-year-old professional organization of concierges all over the world. To join, applicants must be at least 21 years of age and have at least five years of hotel experience, with at least three of those years working as a lobby concierge. Applicants must also pass a written test, submit letters of recommendation, and pass test phone calls by examiners who pose as hotel guests.

Of the approximately 10,000 hotel concierges in the United States, 400 apply to join Les Clefs d'Or annually, and only 20 to 50 are accepted. In 2005, there were approximately 500 members of the U.S.

Fun Fact

Believe it or not, there's a school just for concierges in Canada. The Merici International Concierge Institute (MICI) trains future concierges for potential careers in hotels and resorts, deluxe residencies and office buildings, corporations, tour and travel companies, retail stores, private clubs and even to start their own private concierge services. Check out its website at www.college-merici.qc.ca/merici concierges for more information.



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Fun Fact

In Spanish-speaking countries the term “concierge” is literally defined as “janitor,” so you are less likely to find independent businesses calling themselves concierge services in those countries!

chapter of Les Clefs d’Or. Les Clefs d’Or means “the keys of gold,” and it’s the emblem adopted by the association. Hence the gold-key pins that you will see on the lapels of concierges who are members of Les Clefs d’Or. If a hotel concierge is ever found guilty of an ethical breach, such as accepting commissions from restaurants or of committing an illegal act, he or she is banned from the group for life and must surrender the gold keys.

Corporate concierges are employed by a corporation to serve the firm’s employees. The niche for corporate concierges grew out of the desire of some corporations to keep their employees so happy that they would never leave for greener pastures. In the quest for worker satisfaction, some companies have hired concierges to help employees with planning business trips, picking up dry cleaning, ordering dinner, running errands and so on. Dentists, psychologists, massage therapists and others are even offering their services in the workplace through concierges.

A *personal concierge* is not employed by a hotel or a corporation. Instead, they market their services directly to clients who pay them for running errands, buying gifts, making travel arrangements, or myriad other tasks. Some of their clients may, however, be corporations that contract with them to be available for employee requests.

While personal concierges typically appeal to a different market than those in hotels or corporations, their markets sometimes overlap. For instance, a businessperson may use the services of a hotel concierge while traveling and the services of a personal concierge after returning home.

Typically, a personal concierge builds a client base that uses his or her services on a regular basis. Clients might mostly be individual consumers or predominately small businesses or a combination of the two. The personal concierge business is still relatively new and evolving, so no hard-and-fast rules exist. Again, this business is definitely what you make it. (You’ll read more about defining the personal concierge market in Chapter 4.)

It is important to note that as the concierge industry continues to evolve, a new term is cropping up to represent the full spectrum of concierge duties that might be performed for a client. Some entrepreneurs are no longer calling themselves “concierges” but have adopted the term “lifestyle management consultants,” especially abroad.

Smart Tip

So you want to start a concierge service outside of a bustling urban area? Consultant Katharine Giovanni suggests finding a niche first. Target a certain segment of the population and make that your specialty. For example, focus on your local hospital, shopping mall, airport, college or schools, condominiums or office buildings. By customizing your services to a local market segment, you can attract steady, loyal business even in a rural area.



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Striking While The Iron Is Hot

Whether it's because of time constraints or just a need for convenience, more and more consumers are turning to personal concierges to streamline their lives. Again, no official numbers are available on just how many people work as personal concierges, but consider these facts:

- More and more hotel concierges, after learning every aspect of the trade, are walking away from their jobs to start their own personal concierge businesses.
- The internet has made it easier for entrepreneurs to succeed in far-flung fields. For example, the internet allows a personal concierge in Idaho to target potential clients in Louisiana—or even Paris.

Some personal concierges say the indus-

try was so new when they started their businesses that there were few experts to turn to for advice. The few people already established in the field were often reluctant to give away any secrets for fear of competition. As the field grew, more resources became available; you can find some of these listed in the Appendix of this book.

In The Driver's Seat

Think of a concierge as someone who can attend to the little—and the big—details of life for people who don't have the time to attend to the details themselves. Concierge businesses can offer a smorgasbord of services or specialize in one or two areas. For instance, some personal concierges set up clients' offices and help them manage their

Getting Personal

Jeanette Clarey, the concierge consultant in Minnesota, had several kinds of jobs before starting her personal concierge business. She spent many years working as an elementary school teacher, followed by a stint as director of a day-care center. Listening to so many families bemoan their lack of time got her to thinking about another career—a career in which she could help people who didn't have time to take care of their day-to-day errands. She worked as a corporate concierge for a few years, which allowed her to learn the ins and outs of the business. That experience paved the way for her to open her own business as a personal concierge in 1995. By 1998, Clarey's firm shifted to consulting to corporations looking to establish their own on-site concierge services for employees.

Clarey says the personal concierge business is a lot of fun, but it's also a lot of work. Because she had experience, a good list of potential clients, a complete home office and an understanding of what she needed to get her service going, Clarey was able to start her business for only \$250—the cost to have some brochures and marketing materials printed up. She says her business was almost immediately successful. One key reason? She zeroed in on a business that had relatively little competition at the time.

Today, Clarey says startup and marketing costs could easily run closer to \$5,000 to \$10,000. Says Clarey, "I find that those trying to start personal concierge services now have a much more difficult time marketing and need to hit their market with professional materials and advertising that appears consistently in local publications. One ad won't create results. They should also be prepared to 'float' for up to two years without full-time income from this business."

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schedules. Others offer to do everything from standing in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles (no joke!) to helping set up an elaborate marriage proposal. Some concierge businesses specialize in tracking down tickets for concerts or other events, shopping for gifts, and locating hard-to-find items and collectibles. Some offer pet-sitting services. The list of services is endless, and it changes every day.

Kim Macaulay in Denver feels that she provides her clients with something more than just the services her company offers. “Personal concierges take charge of the components of [clients’] lives that they just don’t have the time or the inclination to tackle. This creates time for our clients to focus on the things that truly matter most to them.”

You Need That When?

A personal concierge’s duties can be as simple as gift shopping for a client or as elaborate as arranging to have a Rolls Royce

waiting at the airport to whisk a client and his girlfriend to a hotel room stocked with six dozen red roses, chilled champagne, a catered prime rib dinner, and a camera to record her reaction when he proposes.

Personal concierges are people with connections. They know how to get front-row tickets to a concert that has been sold out for weeks. They know who to call when a client isn’t happy with the color of his rental car and wants a fire-engine red convertible delivered now. They don’t panic when a client calls with a last-minute request for a private jet. They have contact databases that read like a who’s who. And most important, they perform well under pressure and almost always get the job done—politely and with a smile.

Personal or corporate concierges generally have a support staff and the resources to handle a variety of logistics. For instance, Cynthia Adkins in San Diego frequently handles requests from out-of-town clients because she has contract employees all over

The Inside Story

What does it take to be an entrepreneur? Kim Macaulay, founder of It’s a Matter of Time in Denver, offers some insight. She admits to being afraid when she first leapt into entrepreneurship and feels she should have had more faith when she first began.

“I know it may sound odd, but when you take that leap into the entrepreneurial world, it can be very frightening,” says Macaulay. “Looking back, I realize that the old adage that ‘you get out of it what you put into it’ is so very true. Ultimately, the only thing holding me back was me. Once I realized that, I also realized that the most crucial ingredient needed to ensure my success was also me.”

Since getting into the entrepreneurial mindset, she has allowed her vision for her business to change over time as she got to know her customers better. “Initially, I envisioned a service that could help people, that would make their lives less hectic by taking over all those errands and other responsibilities that drive most of us crazy,” explains Macaulay. “I now understand that it goes much deeper than that. We are affecting the quality of our clients’ lives in a very positive way by working with them and truly understanding what it’s going to take to give them some time back to focus on the areas of their lives that are important to them.”

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Fun Fact

As a personal concierge, you have to be prepared to do what it takes to keep a client happy—but keep in mind that not all requests have to be filled by you. When one concierge received a call to come down to a senior home to clip the toenails of all its residents, that concierge politely referred them to a podiatrist.

the United States to help her fulfill requests. Perhaps she has a client in Dallas who wants tickets to an upcoming concert in that city. She phones her sources in Dallas or uses one of her contract employees there to secure the tickets. She also has employees at her office to hold down the fort if she needs to travel to meet long-distance clients.

Still, there are certain requests even the best personal concierge can't fill. When one personal concierge in Texas received an unusual inquiry, she had to ask the client to repeat the request. The client wanted the concierge to find her a husband. But not just any husband. The woman wanted to marry a rich oil sheik! The concierge politely informed the client that a dating service was one of the few things her company did not provide. However, she then compiled a list of dating services and wished the client well in her marriage quest.

Personal concierges aren't just for people with deep pockets. Time-saving perks are enjoyed by all sorts. A personal concierge's clients might include everyone from corporate millionaires and hot-shot celebrities to couples with two incomes but zero free time or single moms holding down two jobs. One client may require the services of a personal concierge only a couple of hours a month,

while another client may insist that the concierge be available at all times.

Well, Isn't That Convenient?

One concierge we spoke with says most people don't have a clear picture of what a concierge is, explaining that the individual concierge physically sitting at a desk is largely an anachronism. People want the discriminating judgment and knowledge of a concierge as well as the convenience of being able to contact them 24/7 from wherever they happen to be.

Another concierge says that it's important to anticipate clients' needs before they even voice them. She tells of one client who was recuperating from back surgery. Her concierge company did a lot of extra things for the client without having to be asked, including sending someone over with meals for her and dropping by sometimes just to check on her. The concierge noted that this client will probably be a customer for life.

Even though being a personal concierge is, by all accounts, a rewarding job, it can also be a stressful one. "The hardest thing about the job is keeping all the details straight," says Cynthia Adkins. "You have a lot of balls in the air; the more successful you are, the more balls you have in the air."

According to the concierges interviewed for this book, people who make the best

Stat Fact

According to a recent survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are about 41 million multiple-income families in this country. If everyone in a household is working, nobody has time to run errands—so business is likely to pick up for personal concierges.



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concierges share certain characteristics: They're patient, calm, resourceful, have good contacts, and enjoy people. If that sounds like you, and you like having a different routine every day, juggling multiple projects and making people happy, this could be the business for you. We'll talk a lot more about what it takes to be a concierge and explore a typical day in the life of a concierge in Chapter 3.

Bringing Home The Bacon

Personal concierges can expect to make anywhere from \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year, conservatively. However, businesses with annual incomes of \$125,000 or more are not unheard of, depending on their location, the clients they take on and the range of services they offer. Katharine Giovanni with Triangle Concierges Inc. says there is a company in Texas making \$5 million a year, but she adds that they are "certainly not the norm." In addition, concierges often receive tips or gifts from grateful clients.

Concierges bill their clients in a variety of ways. For instance, some charge membership fees based on how many requests are usually made per month. Others bill on monthly retainers or charge per service or per hour. It's your game, and you can tailor it to meet your needs.

Concierges say their fees typically work out to \$25 to \$125 an hour, depending primarily on the concierge company's location, but fees can also be based on the particular task. If concierges dip into their own money to purchase something for a client, the client is billed for the item later.

Some personal concierges also receive what are known as referral fees from various companies when they steer business to them. Companies that often pay referral fees include wedding planners, caterers and florists. Many concierges will pick up extra income via this avenue. The industry average "commission" is 10 percent.

Start Me Up

By now, you must be wondering what kind of hard cash it takes to get started in the personal concierge business.

Since it is a service business, starting a personal concierge business doesn't require a large financial investment. In fact, much of what you'll need to be a good concierge can't be bought—for instance, the contacts that come from long-term business relationships with the right people. You can't put a price tag on those contacts, but having them puts you well on the way to success.

Startup costs for a personal concierge business are estimated to be between \$1,500 and \$2,000 if you already have a computer and other office basics, such as a printer and fax machine. If not, the figure could be considerably higher, depending on what kind of computer system and other office supplies you buy.

In addition to a computer, items such as office supplies, reference materials, postage, stationery, business cards, phone, voice mail and internet access are vital to get you started. We'll cover a lot more on equipping your office in Chapter 6. Also, you'll want to be sure to check out *Startup Basics* for very important details regarding

Smart Tip

"Always keep the balance between working in your business and working on your business," says Chantal Boxer of Fini Concierge in Boston. "It is very easy to put business development and business growth projects to the side because you are providing services to existing clients. Both are important to grow a successful business."



Hot On The Trail

If you're going to be a concierge, you must be resourceful and not easily defeated by small obstacles.

Picture this scenario: A client orders a special piece of jewelry and asks his personal concierge to pick up the piece so he can present it to his wife at a dinner party that evening. The concierge gets to the store and finds it closed for inventory. Panic? Not a concierge. He gets busy. Two hours later, he locates the owner of the store, who agrees to open it so the concierge can retrieve the jewelry. The client? He gets his piece of jewelry on time. The wife? Happy as a clam. The concierge? Ends up with a fat tip.

every aspect of starting a new business.

"If you're interested in starting a concierge service and you've done your research, the best advice that I can give is just do it," says Kim Macaulay in Denver. "The advantages of starting a concierge service are that it takes very little capital and the overhead is minimal."

Before we move on to the next step, let's talk about personal shopping services in Chapter 2. Then in Chapter 4, we take a look at just how hot the personal concierge and personal shopping markets are and why they are popping up just about everywhere, including the corporate world.