



Desires fulfilled

Forget tougher economic times, concierge services are booming. *Harriet Meyer* takes a look at what's on offer

Ever wanted to have dinner with the Dalai Lama? Easy. Or a romantic meal on an iceberg? Simple. Want to know where to get your hands on a real-life camel for an Arabian-themed party? No problem. If you've got the cash, and it's legal, there's a whole industry ready and willing to satisfy your every whim. Despite financial turmoil, business is booming for the people known as "lifestyle fixers".

The highest-profiling business in the sector is Quintessentially. Co-founded by the Duchess of Cornwall's nephew Ben Elliot in 2000, it is now firmly established, with offices in more than 60 cities around the world.

"Quintessentially can offer access to the inaccessible and make the seemingly impossible, possible," says spokesman Alex Pakenham, who adds that despite ongoing economic woes the service is increasingly in demand. "Sales rates have continued to climb, and our renewal rates are stronger than ever," he says.

Of Quintessentially's three founders, one worked in the film industry, another was a well-connected entrepreneur and a third brought an exceptional legal background to the mix. They saw the need for a "proactive and personalised" concierge service, being delivered to those wanting the best in life but without the time or the contacts to achieve it. Quintessentially's more famous members include Jemima Khan, Sophie Dahl, Sir Tom Hunter, Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow and various members of Coldplay.

The first tier of membership costs £1,000 (€1,148) a year, while the most exclusive Elite membership costs up to £24,000 a year, and includes your own team of dedicated personal account managers in multiple cities around the world. While potential "elites" might be referred by existing members, the final decision over whether to take them on comes from the three founders, depending on "the compatibility of the potential member with the brand, their net worth, their location, and whether they would add value to the membership base", says Pakenham.

Quintessentially has also launched 32 luxury sister businesses focused on property, travel, luxury retail, wine, art, flowers and private aviation, to name but a few. For example, through Quintessentially Music, you can book a performer for your own event, or get backstage meet and greet opportunities with your favourite artist.

Of course, there have been some particularly elaborate requests. One member asked the company to recreate Batman's Batcave in his house, and then there was the time when it was asked to source a pet jelly fish. It was also Quintessentially who organised the Dalai Lama date and the dinner *a deux* on the iceberg. One member called the company from the Amazon, saying he couldn't find any of the area's rare pink dolphins despite having a guide with him, and a helicopter was duly sent to take him to where they were.

For many people with the spare capital, being a member of a concierge service is seen as a necessity to make their lives run more smoothly, whether they're in need of a last-minute babysitter or tickets for the most sought-after seats at the best sports events.

Concetto Marletta, head of client relations at the Dorchester hotel in London, is also founder of Totally Indispensable, an exclusive private members' concierge service. While he deals with everyday requests in the Dorchester, as a private concierge his tasks may include, for example, getting someone into a fully booked hotel – Cocoa Island in the Maldives, over Christmas. However, sometimes he is forced to decline his clients' requests; for instance, when asked to source two white tiger cubs – research showed they are an endangered species, and it's illegal to trade them.

Alongside private concierges and "fixing" services, some high-end retailers are jumping on the bandwagon by offering a concierge service to their customers that will tie in with their luxury image. For example, while Harrods has a personal shopping service, By Appointment, it also offers

By Appointment Beyond, which arranges “unique experiences” for clients.

These range from tickets to glamorous film launches in London’s West End, Broadway productions in New York, or, perhaps, a St Petersburg ballet or Argentinian polo match. It can also arrange the “party of a lifetime”, whether that’s an opulent English garden party on a private estate or a ladies lunch at home. “No idea is too big, too small, too mad or too much trouble,” claims the company. Perhaps you fancy a trip to one of the most secluded and untouched locations on Earth? This could be, say, a private island, or jungle – stopping off at a five-star igloo on the way.

Luxury phone company Vertu offers three levels of concierge service to its customers, with the basic level free for the first year and £1,850 afterwards. Such a service is, for many, part of the appeal of having a Vertu phone, and what sets them apart.

With the top level of membership, customers have a dedicated concierge who takes all their calls, but even with the entry-level Classic Vertu service, a customer’s preferences are visible on screen to whoever is dealing with them. This has proved handy for its customers. One Vertu client and his family were in an airport departure lounge when they heard that the hotel they were flying to had cancelled their booking. By the time they landed, Vertu had found another hotel and a car to take them there.

However, while most of a concierge service’s day-to-day calls revolve around booking restaurants, theatre tickets, or finding the right place to take business clients for dinner in a foreign city, it is the quirky requests that stand out. Ten Group, for example, has hired an elephant for a wedding for £10,000. Other examples it gives include the member who bought a designer glass bathtub that couldn’t be manoeuvred up the spiral staircase in his Grade II listed house; Ten Group arranged for the street below to close while a crane was brought in to lift the bath through a window.

Another member became stuck in sand while driving through the desert in the United Arab Emirates. He didn’t know his location, but using Google Earth, Ten Group

found the road and “large mosque” the member remembered seeing en route; finally, using his rough location they informed the UAE’s breakdown service to rescue him. On the appeal of Ten Group’s services, Alex Cheatle, chief executive, says: “In an age when anyone can source information online, it’s all about maintaining personal contacts to gain access to things that are not on offer to the general public such as advance tasting menus at top restaurants, access to VIP areas, and complimentary upgrades on flights and in hotels.”

David Thomas runs Marleymanor, another service which he says handles a range of “highly confidential and sensitive assignments for individuals and corporate clients”. To help him in his role, he draws

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Press Association

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Top: Madonna, a member of the concierge service supplied by Quintessentially;
Left: Duchess of Cornwall’s nephew Ben Elliot, co-founder of Quintessentially;
Right: Luxury phone company Vertu also offers concierge services



Harrods: The department store offers a concierge service called By Appointment Beyond

on over nine years of experience in the SAS Reserve Regiment, saying that this training has prepared him for the most “intense and challenging assignments”.

After leaving the service to provide close protection to the Kuwaiti Ambassador in the run-up to the first Gulf War, David established Marleymanor in 1993. Initially, the company specialised in providing close protection and surveillance for blue-chip clients.

However, Thomas says: “When I was dealing with issues for people from an investigative point of view I found they also wanted somebody to arrange, for instance, a chauffeur, which perhaps has no link or association to them as a discreet service – or to find a diamond for a mistress.”

More and more clients were seeking a concierge service as a bolt-on option. “A lot of wealthy people who do not have the time or don’t want to make effort to ring lots of people to arrange, say, a concert, or other event, or they might have an issue to solve in terms of a fraud – they can turn to us for help.”

At any one time, he adds, Marleymanor might be dealing with two or three client requests, and they have 20 to 30 clients on their books. Fees are charged on a case-by-case basis, but are usually 10 to 15% of the overall cost of the case, or a daily management fee of £750 to £1,250 plus expenses, depending on location and duration. The Marleymanor website gives a range of example cases, including the client who asked Marleymanor to source an iPhone for their female friend, with absolute discretion assured.

But this was no ordinary iPhone; it was to incorporate a solid gold casing with the main external controls formed from cut diamonds. A jeweller was sourced in London’s Hatton Garden, before Marleymanor hand delivered the bespoke iPhone to the client in Dubai.

Ifzaal Khan runs Perfect Knowledge, a lifestyle fixer for the secretly wealthy, carrying out tasks from delivering two antiques clocks worth more than £330,000 each to a palace belonging to a Middle Eastern royal family member, to sourcing medical treatment for a child who had only 24 hours to live.

“We managed to get the medicine to the

client’s child, even though it wasn’t available in the country they were in. This was done through contacting the sheikh there, and asking him to instruct his royal family office to source the medicine,” says Khan. “A private jet was sent to pick up the medicine, and it was delivered to the child – so you see it’s a serious business.”

Most of Perfect Knowledge’s clients have been referred through another client. “This means our network of contacts between all our clients is very strong,” says Khan. He adds that the company can deal with cases in most countries through its client network, and works on behalf of a number of Middle Eastern royal family members as well as private family offices and trusts.

Khan says: “The financial crisis has changed the environment as our private clients are becoming more discreet about their financial status thus using our confidential services more often.” Khan is all about building relationships – there’s no chance you could call up and ask for him to get you something out of the blue.

Alternatively, a different approach is adopted by WhiteConcierge, which originated as a travel firm and now offers a concierge service to the customers of financial institutions around the world on their behalf – for example, as part of a customer benefit on a credit card. However, the general public are not eligible for membership.

It cites the example of a customer who

called to say that his wife wanted a watch that had been worn by one of the characters in the previous week’s episode of the television series *Desperate Housewives*. He wanted to buy that exact model for her as an anniversary gift.

A spokesman says: “We called the TV station Channel 4, who put us in contact with the show’s producers in the US. They identified the brand of watch for us and we then contacted the manufacturer to identify the exact model. The bad news? It was not available in the UK. Fortunately, we were able to source the watch from a Swiss jeweller and arranged for it to be delivered to the UK in time for their anniversary.”

Of course, most of the requests concierge services receive are simpler to solve. Yet with such a wide variety of lifestyle management services available, it’s about picking the one that complements your existing arrangements. ■

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