Concierge Culture : 125



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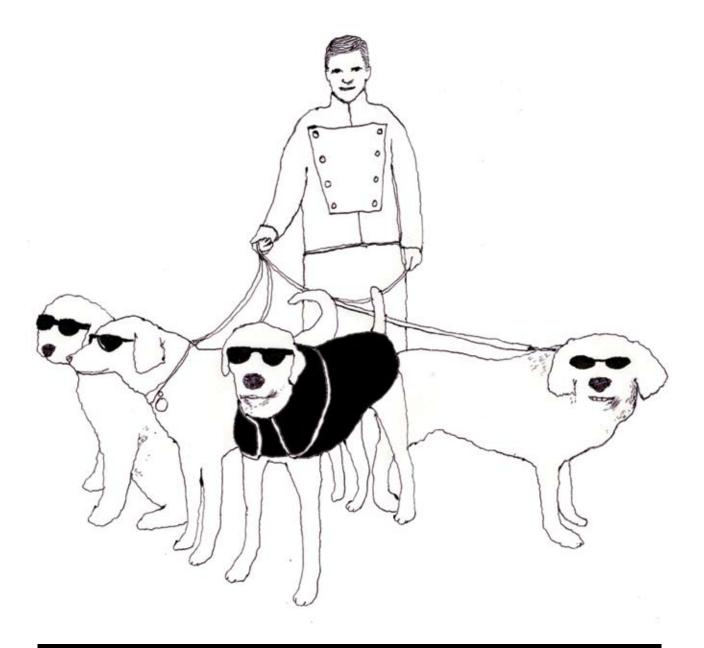
Residences in multiple countristyles will increase the need for home managers, butlers, name ers and personal assistants with have a resurgence and business will grow and become a new car Laurie Moore-Moore, founder, Home Marketing

ies and more complex lifeor lifestyle help. Demand for hies, home help, housekeepill grow. Being 'in service' will ss opportunities in this area areer track.'

The Institute For Luxury

During the last decade, as the rich have got even richer and their number has swelled, there has been a corresponding increase in the quantity of concierge-style services dedicated to the wealthy. There are services that manage their social lives or their homes. There are services that give them more time – or suggest what they could do with that time and therefore help to make their lives more exciting.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOB LONDON



Redefining luxury

Concierge-style service is redefining luxury by placing service at the heart of consumers' experiences with luxury brands. Many industries now use concierge services. 'For today's highnet-worth consumer it's becoming less about consumption,' says Rob Chand, managing partner at Quincy Consulting Group. 'Providing people with excellent customer service is a fantastic way of reaching out to them and creating great advocates for your product.'

Hotels up their concierge game

Hotels have also been improving their concierge services. At London's Mandarin Oriental concierges get to know regular clients' tastes and use this information proactively. For example, if a client is known to like a particular composer whose works are being performed at the nearby Albert Hall, the concierge might secure tickets and call the client, suggesting that he come to stay at the hotel.

Starwood's boutique brand, W Hotels, operates a 'whatever/whenever' concierge service. As long as it's legal, the company claims to be able to cope with any request guests can think of.

Speciality concierges, serving just one whim, is another growth area. The pet concierge at the Rubens Hotel in London is armed with toys, treats and clean-up bags. In October 2007 the Fairmont, Washington DC launched the sleep concierge for guests who find it hard to drop off while away from home. The service offers in-room neck massage, a yoga sleep class, rose petals for your bath, lavender-scented candles, Moët mini nightcaps, sleep-inducing teas with lavender cookies, a silk eye pillow and even teddy bears delivered by the sleep concierge.

Four Seasons Hotels have kids, teen, golf, ski and even surf concierges. Love is in the air at Orient-Express Hotels, which have proposals concierges for guests who want to pop the question with panache. And New York's Roosevelt Hotel has a concierge who suggests the best places to find romance in NYC. Last, but by no means least, there is an aquarium concierge at the Ritz-Carlton in Atlanta, a few blocks away from the largest aquarium in the world.

Holiday homes for the UHNWI market are also now offering concierge services. It's like having a holiday rep at home – only much better and more personal. Companies offering this include Exclusive Resorts, Villa Hotels (a management firm that aims to bring 'the five-star hotel experience' to their private residences), and Quintess. Co-founder of Quintess Ben Addoms says that his club's members will notice incremental improvements in service. 'Every time somebody travels, we learn more about them. When you've gone with us once, you don't have to tell us again that your kids are allergic to gluten.'

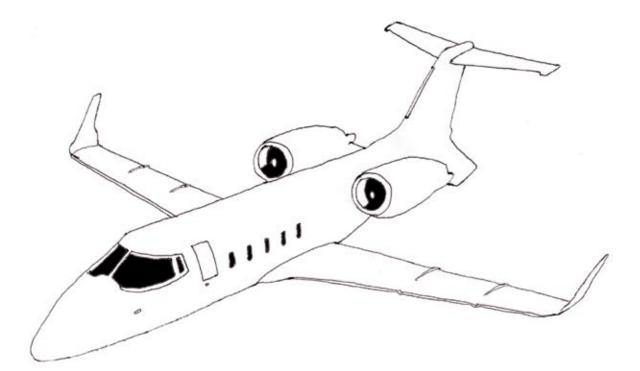
High-style high-rise

New homes aimed at the UHNWI market are now offering concierge services as standard. Adele Cygelman, editor-in-chief of the Robb Report Luxury Home, Vacation Homes and Vertical Living, notes that in the 'super-luxury high-rise' apartment blocks now being built, such as Ian Schrager's 40 Bond in New York, Chi in Miami and One Hyde Park by Candy & Candy in London, as well as hotel condominiums from the Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental and Ritz-Carlton, developers are 'all trying to outdo each other' in terms of design and service.

As many of the innovators in the new concierge culture have backgrounds in hotel service, their ideas are developing along similar lines. Take pet care. Once, a residence might have come with a pet walker. Now it's commonplace to have a dog concierge to look after your dog when you're away, or take your pooch to the hairdresser. The cynic might say that services such as these are just jumping on the concierge-culture bandwagon. But the semantic shift from 'walker' to 'concierge' indicates a deeper, more dedicated level of service and attention to detail.

According to Cygelman, the future will bring a mixture of technology and personal service. Technology is paramount at the Plaza Hotel, New York, which is being converted into a block of luxury condos. Each unit has an automated system with a touch screen created by Concierge Direct, from which residents can pick, choose and order flowers, goods from the pharmacy, or perhaps ask to have their dry cleaning done. Technology won't replace face-to-face interaction, Cygelman says, because some segments of the UHNWI market will be less comfortable with the impersonality of technology than others. And the list of providers will always be hand-picked.

One other aspect of the usefulness of concierge services for the new-build residential market is that, as Cygelman points out, the owner may have handed over millions of dollars, but he won't be able to move in for some years. When a concierge company is involved he immediately has some kind of connection with the property.



A flying start

The private-jet market is now targeting UHNWIs with lifestyle management. Sentient built its brand on its concierge services, according to DeeDee Morrison, founder of New York-based Private Air Magazine.

Card holders attend private parties with celebrities and receive tickets to the Masters. NetJets, she says, is renowned for 'the best concierge services in the industry,' while XJet has 'wine bars, saunas and private hangars for members only.'

That will do nicely

The granddaddy of travel related concierge services, the invitation-only American Express Centurion Card, also known as 'the Black Card', we forget, was launched as far back in October 1999. For an annual fee (£650 per year in the UK) members have 24/7 access to the Amex concierge team, made up of 200 customer-service experts with diverse backgrounds as anything from travel agents to personal assistants. Users can have private jets chartered for them or indulge in out-of-hours shopping trips to Harrods or Saks Fifth Avenue.

Unusual requests the team has dealt with include arranging for an English-speaking parrot to accompany a card member on a trip to Russia and having a diver drag a treasure chest containing an engagement ring on to a Mexican beach while the member walked nearby with his intended. The allure of the Black Card is Amex's ability to use its global purchasing power and contacts to satisfy its members' desires.

More travel concierges

Keen to make the entire holiday, from booking process to getting home, as smooth as possible, travel companies (perhaps in response to the Amex model) are now offering concierge services too. For example, the concierge service at ITC Classics, launched in 2006, not only deals with any problems but also makes restaurant and spa reservations and proactively suggests places to go.

Concierge service is much more than the old style of after-sales service and in-resort support. It is an active service aimed at improving the customer experience. Other companies offering similar services include Exosphere, launched as an offshoot from events organisers Altitude in 2007, and the Private Travel Company, launched as an offshoot from Caribtours in 2006.

New service brokers

According to James Ogilvy, publisher of Luxury Briefing, a major reason companies offer concierge services is to demonstrate that they're 'not just another product on Bond Street.' But for the discerning, or indeed the ultra-rich, he says, concierge services are increasingly becoming lifestyle or in some cases 'fantasy' brokers, being brought in to help clients, to boldly go where no client has gone before. Brands like Quintessentially, Bluefish, or Ten, are already taking us along this route. Quintessentially is generally recognised as the one truly global concierge agency. Founded in 2000, it has 750 employees spread across 38 offices. Services range from finding babysitters to arranging dance lessons to extreme travel arrangements – such as a candlelit dinner in a temple in the Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia, after the ruins are closed to the public.

The success of the company is partly due to its policy of operating franchises, which means that members always get specialist local knowledge. 'It's like having a best friend in every city,' says founder Aaron Simpson.

Each territory has a maximum of 5,000 members, excluding corporate clients. The territories also operate as a club. One of the first things Emma Sherrard did as managing director for the Asia Pacific region was to reject an application. However, once in, members tend to stay. Sherrard says her renewal rates in Asia are 90-95%. There were just four members of staff there in 2005 and now there are 20. Quintessentially also provides white-label concierge services for companies such as Dunhill and Cartier.

This year, the company has begun to use its specific expertise to create spin-offs from its core business. 'It is leveraging its brand positioning in a similar way to Virgin,' notes Guy Salter, deputy chairman of the Walpole Group. There are now Quintessentially Wines, Estates, Driven (a limo service) and Escape (a travel service). Quintessentially offers three levels of service. Fees for the General level are £750 per year, which buys 24/7 access via e-mail or telephone to the reactive Ask Q team. The Dedicated service costs £2.5k, for access to a dedicated proactive account manager. The Elite service is for frequent travellers, who are given their own dedicated account manager in every territory, and costs between £10k and £24k.

Ten UK, is a similar company which has 120 people in its offices in London and Hong Kong, speaking 14 languages and servicing 13,000 requests per month.

Ten's philosophy is also to use experts. In the car market, for example, being a member of Ten 'is like having an uncle in the trade'. Ten's car expert ran his own dealership for 20 years. He can sell your car for you, he can ask specific questions about the car you're buying and he can advise you on what car to buy.

Ten provides concierge services for the mobile phone company Vertu as well as for consultancies, law firms, and banks such as Coutts, Lloyds TSB, MBNA and Barclaycard. Ten offers two levels of service. Ten24 is a reactive service operating 24/7. Fees are £150 per month. With the TenVIP service clients have a proactive single point of contact, an individual lifestyle manager, from £300 per month.



'I want to take service out of its slavery cycle.' Mary Louise Starkey, Starkey International

Fantasy organisers

Bluefish however has taken this very 'bespoke' approach to service delivery a step further. 'There isn't really a word for this kind of thing yet. Basically we're like a fantasy toy store,' says Steve Sims, Bluefish founder. Now CEO of a global concern employing 3,000 people, with 52,000 subscribers to its newsletter, Sims started out as a stockbroker's runner who honed his persuasive skills in Bangkok in the early 90s.

'I was trying to get expats to open a bank account with my firm, but they didn't like my accent,' says Sims in Estuary English. Sims ended up gatecrashing expat parties to pitch in person. He befriended people, got them tickets to exclusive functions and even started his own club. The name of the company stems from one of the passwords he gave members to use on the door.

Bluefish doesn't do lifestyle or time management. But, says Sims, most concierge companies, including the American Express Centurion service, come to his company when they need to arrange the moneycan't-buy, 'inside the velvet rope' experiences for their members, such as getting into the Grammy Awards. One customer in Monaco asked for a James Bond experience for her husband, which involved him being kidnapped by women in black latex, whisked onto a replica of the boat from Octopussy and rescued 007-style by US Navy Seals.

Behind the outrageous ideas and partygoing image is meticulous attention to detail, backed up by a powerful, bespoke IT system. Sims and his associates go so far as to make a note of what each client is wearing or what they drink. This is all recorded on a database on which the company 'spent a fortune'.

Even technology companies are muscling in on the fantasy broker idea. Launched in 2002, Nokia's Vertu collection uses as many tangibles as possible, including rubies and sapphires, to produce the world's most expensive mobile phones. Handsets can cost up to \$310k. But, for all the gems, the makers' biggest coup is an intangible with a very high perceived value: a button with a similar function to Commissioner Gordon's Bat Phone. Instead of the Caped Crusader, Vertu owners have a hotline to the Vertu Concierge service run by Ten UK.

Keeping it exclusive

As more brands appear, more are appearing to remain exclusive. 'How can you be exclusive if you've got 10,000 members?' asks Xenios Thrasyvoulou, CEO and founder of Arcarnus. His company of 20 employees, created in 2003, is now closed to new members. Thrasyvoulou believes more than the current level – 500 members in the UK – would dilute the exclusivity of the service. For him, the way to expand is to franchise the offering into more territories, with Arcarnus providing the know-how, IT system and international contacts. The company's focus is on emerging markets in the Middle and Far East. 'It's best to use local people who know the local system,' he says. The company is close to sealing a deal in Saudi Arabia with a consortium affiliated with the Abdullah. Fees for its services in the UK are £250 per month.

There are other concierge companies which prefer to operate on a more personal and exclusive level. Concierge London, run by Lady Cosima Somerset, has a client list capped at 200 members which includes UK celebrities such as Jemima Khan and Tara Palmer-Tomkinson. The membership fee is £5k per year, plus £30 per hour during office hours, £50 per hour outside of office hours, and there are extra fees for event planning or property search. Another is the Philadelphia-based American Royalty, established in December 2005 by 24-year-old entrepreneur Chaka Fattah. He aims to have 50 clients. So far he has 20, with fees from \$24k per year.



Retail concierge

Concierge culture is becoming more important in other retailing areas. As far back as 1997, Barneys New York pioneered the concierge concept in a retail environment in order to entice wealthy Upper East Siders to Chelsea, which was then considered a less salubrious area. When the store moved to Madison Avenue it kept the concierge service. This September, the Liberty store in London introduced a similar concept. Its concierge service aims to do all that a hotel's would, for instance getting you a table at the Ivy. (Though on one occasion when The Future Laboratory called there was no reply after five minutes. Well, they only have a one-man team,

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after all.) London-based transporters Cadogan Tate Fine Art has an antiques concierge who connects art and antiques dealers and shops with collectors and interior designers from overseas.

Financial management companies

Aside from credit cards, other financial companies are also using concierge services to engage with their customers. Wealth-management companies such as London-based Cavendish Young and the Scorpio Partnership are finding that, because their clients trust them, they are being asked to do more and more for them – and not all to do with financial advice. Both these companies offer buy:time's services as a way of ensuring their clients are looked after.

A Spears Wealth Management Awards 2007 nominee for best concierge service, UK-based buy: time was set up in 2003 by Claire Brynteson because she 'needed someone to get things off my to-do list'.

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Her company of 15 lifestyle managers, all women, helps hundreds to manage their lives. It's like sharing a personal assistant: buy:time offers flexible levels of service on a pay-as-you-go model (fees are between £29 and £45 per hour), and will do anything from running the London office of a Monaco-based entrepreneur to getting a client's car back after it has been clamped. The company also works with concierge companies such as Ten UK and Quintessentially.

The pay-as-you-go concierge

With the growth of a New Mass Affluent class, we are likewise witnessing the rise of by-thehour concierge and personal assistant models.

Set up in 2002 and operated by three former hotel concierges, Head Concierge works on a pay-asyou-go model. It costs £10 per hour for any service delivered from the office and £25 per hour for any service for which the team has to go off site. This simple model works because, thanks to their time working in five-star hotels, the three founders have a vast network of contacts throughout London and beyond, plus existing relationships with HNWIs. They handle 1,200 individual clients and also manage corporate accounts for hospitals, private banks and travel companies.

Keeping it personal

After a career in television direct marketing, Valerie Castle missed the sort of personal assistance that meant she could 'get on with living life'. When she found there was no service that catered for her needs, she saw a gap in the market and in 2003 set up Conciant. Now the firm has 102 employees with differing skill sets, such as travel or event planning. Tasks include finding pet sitters, setting up dance lessons and giving directions.

What makes Conciant different, says Castle, is its insistence on service, achieved through '21st-century driven technology'. Which means 310 pre-programmed services provided by a proprietary IT system based on Concierge Assistant software, developed by Gold Key Solutions. This has 'lots of bells and whistles that permit the lifestyle concierges to operate in real time, and keep Conciant's information fresh.' As well as HNWIs and other individuals, Conciant works for corporates, buildings, hotels and cruise ships (such as the new Four Seasons ship launching in 2010) as a customer-loyalty service. Fees range from \$3.5k for the basic individual service, available 8am-8pm in your local time, and upwards of \$24k for the 24/7 service.

Small companies with regional expertise, who act as concierges for local people and as wellconnected travel guides for visitors, are springing up. Examples include Serena Cook's Deliciously Sorted in Ibiza. Tatler commented: 'for a visit to the island of Ibiza, make sure the telephone number of Serena Cook is tattooed on your arm.' Another is Deluxe, a lifestyle concierge agency set up by 24-year-old socialite Maret Soom in Tallinn, Estonia. 'We work on an hourly fee basis as lawyers do. The fee is 2,000 EEK per hour – about £86.' In Asia, the six employees of Luxury Concierge China, set up in 2005, look after 75 CEOs and celebrities as well as visitors to Shanghai.

Household managers

The home is another area where dull and distracting chores are increasingly being outsourced. Strictly speaking, lifestyle managers in this field shouldn't be called concierges but 'household managers'. 'A butler looks after what's inside your home, a concierge looks after everything outside your home,' says Robert Watson, director of the Guild of Professional English Butlers. The guild's trainees work at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas and Dubai's Burj Al Arab, among others. And just as many of us want concierges, more of us, says Mrs Mary Louise Starkey want butlers and household managers.

Mary Louise Starkey (who prefers to be known by the more formal appellation Mrs Starkey) has been a household manager for 26 years, during which time she has seen the role of household manager change from lowpaid menial to respectable career option.

Her company Starkey International trains household managers and then places them in homes around the world. Clients include UHNWIs and the households of the top US Army, Navy and embassy staff. Almost three decades ago the typical household manager earned \$500 per month. Now a third of Mrs Starkey's graduates go on to earn more than \$100k per year. She considers her new 700page book Mrs Starkey's Original Guide to Private Service Management, published in November 2007, to be the household management bible.

Is 'concierge' the new 'boutique'?

The 'boutique' movement began with Ian Schrager's designer hotels and gradually filtered down to the mass market – to the point where the cachet of the original concept was lost. And the same will happen with concierge culture.

There is a trend nowadays to add to any service the word concierge,' says Yaffa Assouline, editor of luxuryculture.com. 'But more often than not these services are not relevant. All brands are now developing a concierge service. Neiman Marcus, for example, provides this – though [it] is nothing new. It's just the wording that has changed.' Another instance of this is Xexoo, makers of seriously swanky iPod upgrades that will set you back upwards of £30k, which offers a 24/7 concierge service. On closer examination, this is just a helpline.

But although 'boutique' has lost its special meaning within the hotel industry, the concept has revolutionised people's expectations in terms of design and functionality within hospitality. The same will happen with service.

Take Topshop, that ultimate follower of fashion. Its concierge service, launched in 2006, is partly a rebrand of the 40-strong style-assistant team as well as a pared-down, high-street concierge service. When The Future Laboratory called in to ask if a particular exhibition in London was open late, the information was found – after some searching.

But as more luxury brands offer services that help customers avoid the quotidian, the dull and the distracting, what's the next level of service luxury brands can offer?

Milton Pedraza at the New York-based Luxury Institute suggests the next thing could be the sort of lifestyle-management consultancy offered by Quincy Consulting Group. 'I think the concierge level will become passé and there will be a new, higher-level category of personal consultant,' says Pedraza.

Set up by three former management consultants with backgrounds at McKinsey and Accenture, with experience in venture capitalism and the entertainment industry, Quincy Consulting Group merges concierge and consultancy services to provide clients with support in both their private and business lives. 'For us, the concierge part is the back office,' says Rob Chand, managing partner. 'We help in business and personal life – after all, where one ends and the other begins is becoming increasingly skewed.'

The company is aimed squarely at UHNWIs, providing them with one point of contact for their business and personal requests – whether they want a lawyer, an accountant, a corporate trainer, a reservation at the hottest restaurant in town or a party to be arranged at the Monaco Grand Prix with live music from Wyclef Jean, Jay-Z and Bono. One thing that sets Quincy Consulting Group apart is that, although it has a raft of contacts, it doesn't claim to know all the answers. But it does promise to handle each client request with the competence of experienced project managers. It is this aspect that appeals to Guy Salter, deputy chairman of the Walpole Group. 'Having high-quality brains taking a McKinsey-style approach to your personal and business life sounds a very appealing idea.'

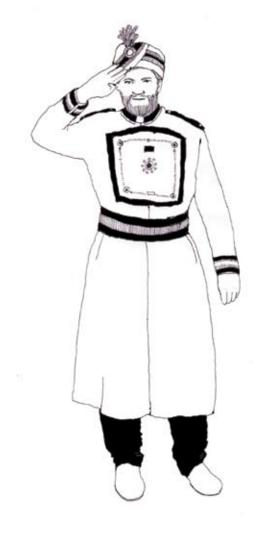
Launched in late 2004, Quincy Consulting Group is currently, enabling 28 clients to focus on the most valuable use of their time. Fees are from \$25k per year.

So what sort of concierge service should your brand offer?

Well for one, brands should be aware of differences in expectation that stem from their target market's gender, age, wealth-stage and culture. For example, it is worthy of note that the majority of the concierge companies dedicated to removal of the dull and distracting have been established by women. And, referring to cultural differences, Quintessentially's Emma Sherrard points out that, in Asia, where people aren't used to paying for service, there is extra pressure on her staff to 'deliver on every request. There are very high expectations in this part of the world.' According to Sophy Roberts, editor-at-large of American Express's Departures magazine, the rise of personalised concierge services is down to 'the depersonalisation of our existence. Concierge seems to put a live human face back into the equation.' Yaffa Assouline concurs: 'I believe personal concierges have the greatest knowledge and experience of what is true service.' So good concierge brands need very good and very 'visible' people behind them, and fronting them. And nowhere should this be more the case than in the world of luxury.

A report produced by Guy Salter and innovations consultancy IDEO titled 'Has luxury become a one-night stand?' criticises luxury companies for not taking long-term relationships with their customers seriously enough. Concierge services are an ideal way of making luxury more than just a passing fling. As Salter says: 'The really engaging thing is that if you get this right you really can develop the most valuable thing: a real relationship with the customer.'

And such a relationship could be the key to opening the UHNWI door. As John Saunders, chief executive of invitation-only concierge travel agency Exosphere, says: 'It's all about trust. If someone understands you, you'll trust them to do any service.'



'There is a trend nowadays to add to any service the word 'concierge'. More often than not these services are not relevant.' Yaffa Assouline, luxuryculture.com

What this means to your brand

You probably assume that service is well-established at the heart of all luxury offers. If that's the case, you assume wrong. Our HNWIs (67%) and our New Mass Affluents (80%) both tell us that service is the one aspect they increasingly find lacking in luxury brands, especially in the travel, leisure and retail sectors.

By service they don't just mean a brand's ability to respond to their needs, spoken or unspoken, as Mary Louise Starkey, founder of Starkey International, told us recently: the problem lies with attention to detail. This, she believes, is the crux of the matter, and we agree. It should be the mantra of any brand or a business that wants to place 'service' at its very core. Yes, you need to respond to the customer's five wants: 'I WANT what I WANT, when I WANT it, and I WANT that and I WANT it now', but you have to do so in a detailed, meticulous, comprehensive and methodical way.

In short, you can't afford not to know what you cannot possibly know, as Ben Elliot of Quintessentially tells us. And this, along with Mary Louise Starkey's exhortation that when it comes to service, detail is all, sums up the golden rule of concierge culture for the 21st century. After that, all else is, well, detail. And more detail. And this is where most retail brands, especially in the luxury sector, fall down on their promises: lack of detail, lack of client checks and balances, and a more noticeable lack of follow-through.

Regarding the five wants, for most brands it is decidedly a case of 'WE will give you what WE want, when WE want to give it, WE only want to give it when WE are ready to do so, and only between nine and five'.

A simplification, yes, but how many brands provide a 24/7 service of the calibre conceived by Ten UK or Quintessentially, or the service provided by Mrs Starkey for her clients at the Paris Ritz or the White House? How many even provide a fraction of this?

More to the point, how many of us see service as a core, non-negotiable plank of our strategy and pledge to our customer, rather than one that is a 'value-added' extra to be shifted at will?

The rules, we believe, are simple and very much a part of those brands we are familiar with and like: the Caprice Group, Aman resorts, the Colombe d'Or in St Paul de Vence, Soho House in New York, the Ritz in Paris (but not in London), the Cipriani in Venice, Virgin Upper Class, first class on BA, Bergdorf in New York, the Merrion in Dublin and so on. Here we find first-name service that is friendly but not familiar; knowledgeable but never knowing; exclusive, but never exclusory; insightful but not intrusive; exemplary but never explanatory. At no point should any detail of a person's needs, wants or peccadilloes be ignored – or, indeed, filed. The best maitre d's rely on memory, not their BlackBerry; the best concierges, if they have a little black book, use it to illuminate your day or night, not merely to recall who you are or what you do.

Only hire people who are trained never to turn their back on their audience when speaking; an old theatre trick, more applicable than ever in retail and hospitality. They should know who they are speaking to; and, if meeting for the first time, then asking is certainly the best and most memorable way achieve this. They should understand the nature of the need and how they are about to solve the problem being proffered to them; it is always good to use the head waiter's trick of repeating the order to ensure that all aspects are understood.

And, wherever possible, they should allow the story of the solution to be seen. Danny Meyer is the owner of some of the most popular restaurants in the US, including Union Square Cafe, Gramercy Tavern, Shake Shack, Blue Smoke, Tabla, Eleven Madison Park and the Modern. According to Meyer, making this a key part of his strategy to deal with customers concerns significantly boosted their satisfaction with his staff's responses. Making sure service is seen to be delivered is as important as delivering it, says Meyer.

Meyer has made a fetish of service and says it is still all about the detail of the familiar, which is why his favourite bar for teaching staff is Molly's Shebeen in New York. Meyer elaborates: 'It is the kind of place where Clancy reaches across the bar, knows me, knows my name, and even though he knows my favourite drink, he still says, 'The first one's on the house. What'll it be?'.'

That's our question as well: what will it be? Service on your terms, or on your customers' terms?

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