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How to select a concierge for your conference

Denver Business Journal - by [Todd Wheeler](#)

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Like wireless access and free drink coupons, business travelers now expect concierge services when they attend conferences.

No problem, you might say -- the conference hotel has a concierge. Not so fast, over-stressed conference coordinator guy. Relying on a hotel's concierge or a convention center's information desk might not be your best option. It may make sense for you to hire your own concierge.

First, we need to understand the potentials and limitations of hotel-based concierges and information desk staff.

On the upside, these professionals are very good at serving the needs of their hotel guests. But therein lies one of the problems: Many conference attendees are likely to have accommodations at other hotels, and increasingly, with family and friends who live in the area.

In addition, since they're hotel-based, their menu of available services may be limited.

Besides being able to handle the typical requests for transportation, restaurant reservations and entertainment options, private concierges must possess a much wider base of expertise. A professional conference concierge can easily manage all faxing, last-minute print jobs, shipping, packaging, computer rentals and setups, and AV/presentation needs.

Even translation, staffing needs, technical instruction and equipment repairs can be handled by concierge companies that have specialized experts on call.

Need plants or furniture for your event? Yes, a conference concierge should be able to handle that, too.

Having your own concierge means you call the shots on how the service will run. For example, will tips be accepted or refused? (Being thoroughly "tipped out," conferees typically love it when they don't have to tip yet again.) Are unusual requests OK, such as pulling together a last-minute birthday party for the keynote speaker at an offsite location?

Medical care also deserves your consideration. For emergencies, you'll call 911. But what about non-emergency medical needs? Can the concierge assist with that? A professional conference concierge should be able to.

When hiring a concierge, don't be afraid to ask the touchy questions. Do you get referral



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fees for sending customers to certain restaurants, shows, etc.? While this practice is commonplace, concierges who aren't motivated by this type of payment typically have a broader selection of vendors and therefore can provide better service.

Other concierge questions may include:

- How long have you been around?
- How big is your firm?
- How many staffers do you have? What training do your concierges go through? What is their level of experience?
- Are all of your concierges notaries?
- Are you a member of one of the two dominant, professional concierge associations? The best private concierges are members of the International Concierge and Errand Association or the National Concierge Association, if not both.
- How are fees structured? Hourly or project-based? In Colorado, hourly fees for a concierge run between \$35 and \$85, with some mountain locations having the higher fees. Your overall cost can usually be adjusted to fit your budget.

What services are offered, where the conference is conducted, whether the concierge is onsite and the number of attendees all affect your total concierge cost. Most larger conferences choose onsite concierges, but meetings with smaller budgets can achieve stellar results using offsite services that are accessible via Web site, e-mail, fax and phone.

- What are your favorite restaurants, transportation services and entertainment venues?
- How do you measure your effectiveness and performance? Points are scored here for firms that have a solid evaluation system and are willing to share its details with you.
- If required by the venue, is the concierge company bonded and insured?

As you would when hiring other service firms, check references. Don't just call their previous clients; also call some of the conference city's major restaurants, transportation firms and entertainment venues. Ask how the concierge is to work with and about their reputation.

The concierge industry continues to grow rapidly due to strong demand in many settings. Auto concierges? Ski concierges? Golf concierges? They're all out there. While this growth is a strong indication of how useful a concierge service can be, it also means there are a wide variety of skill and competency levels represented by these firms.

In addition, as the concept of concierge services has become more accepted, conference attendees and others are putting more trust in concierges. For example, running to the ATM with a conference attendee's bank card and PIN isn't unusual. Of course for you, the person in charge of making your conference a raging success, it makes it that much more important for you to choose a concierge firm you can trust.

While hiring a concierge is only one of many decisions you have to make when hosting a conference, if done thoughtfully, it can help your conference run smoothly and leave your attendees looking forward to next year.

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