

# How to spend it

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UNCOMMON SCENTS







# small world, big business

**Concierge services are now less about delivering “impossible” requests and more about the ultimate lifestyle edit. Sophy Roberts profiles the fixer firms that claim to make their clients’ lives perfectly simple. Illustration by Max Ellis.**

**E**very month, nine glossy magazines hit my doorstep with a daunting thud. They range from *World of Interiors* to *American Vogue*, and they all get a cursory glance before being stacked up in a corner of my office. I look at them with occasional pangs of guilt, refusing to give up my subscriptions while increasingly aware that I don't have the time to attend to them any more, much less eat, drink or sleep in all the places I read about whenever I do get a free minute. Nor am I alone. “We call it ‘stuffocation,’” says James Wallman, editor of LS:N Global, the lifestyle news network from trends consultancy The Future Laboratory.

More and more of us could be described as “globizens”, interested as much in what’s going on in the Horn of Africa as we are in the latest go-to restaurant in Manhattan. We are a generation drowning in information of a global type, the overload somehow also disconnecting us from what’s relevant to our largely locally-orientated day-to-day lives. It is a disconnect I am reminded of every week when I get on the train to London on a Monday morning and pick up the free local rag. *The Marshwood Vale Magazine* is entirely true to its geography, covering a 50-mile-or-so radius on the borders of West Dorset where I live. There is no glossy fashion in there, nor 10,000-word, award-winning essays on the Taliban. Nor do I have to navigate 50 free ads to get to the plumber’s number I seek. I give it my time because not only is it well put together, it’s where I find all the significant contacts that make a busy household

function smoothly in its own little world. This local core is what so-called concierge companies have been delivering with efficiency over the past 10 years, making their clients’ lives easier by making the world a smaller place. “Every person on the planet is trying to squeeze 36 hours into a 24-hour day,” says Katharine C Giovanni, founder of The International Concierge and Lifestyle Management Association (ICLMA), representing companies in more than 45 countries worldwide. “It’s why the concierge sector has seen slow and steady growth despite the crises in the world economy.”

The numbers support Giovanni’s claim. Wallman quotes recent research by brand strategy consultant Siegel+Gale; The Global Brand Simplicity Index states that between 10 and 23 per cent of consumers are now ready to spend extra for an uncomplicated experience.

Take Quintessentially. Established in 2000, the global concierge company now operates 61 offices worldwide, from New York to Nairobi, Buenos Aires to Bangkok. And Ten Lifestyle Concierge, the first such business when launched in London in 1998, now services more than 800,000 private individuals on behalf of more than 70 organisations in Europe, Asia and America. The company manages an average of 35,000 member requests a month, with new offices opening in São Paulo, Shanghai and Singapore by this time next year.

Yet it’s not these giant statistics that are driving the more interesting trend. In 2011, the call-centre fixer is no longer enough for the small coterie at the tip of the pyramid – people who want to speak to human beings they truly know and trust, who have the authority to act quickly, and better still, second-guess their needs. They want an über-filter – a person to cut through

the maelstrom as we drown in competing pulls on our time, from the mundane (voicemails, bills, direct debit mandates, insurance claims and speeding fines, all of which are threatening to fill the free hour I don’t have on the day I write this story) to some of the biggest decisions we make: house purchases, relocation choices, staff, investors, our children’s schools.

This month, Quintessentially launches a new arm to its business: Quintessentially People, headed up by Samuel Martin, previously executive assistant to a high-profile US-Swiss couple. The idea responds to precisely this deepening focus required by the company’s top clients: they don’t just want bookings made – hotels, restaurants, planes – or connections with other like-minded members, which is the social matrix Quintessentially has always supplied. The luxury goods benefits that come with Quintessentially’s different tiers of membership are all very well, but the growing need is for greater human contact in solving members’ day-to-day challenges: teams of bodyguards, estate managers, housekeepers, PAs. Quintessentially can’t do it all, so instead it is helping the über-rich hire more staff – vetting every one of them before a recommendation is made. This new resource is an outgrowth, says Quintessentially co-founder Ben Elliot, from the top strand of the business: the £10,000-a-year Elite service, where members are assigned a specific fixer in the city in which they live, the concierge usually meeting with the client for regular face-to-face catch-ups. “Post the 2008 crises, we’ve seen the very rich seek much more rigorous results,” says Elliot. “There is demand for greater specificity over and above the mass affluent, which means a simple phone-based

relationship isn't enough." The prices Quintessentially charges reflect this evolution. "When we first launched, we charged a £250 annual membership and were a London-based service," says Elliot. "Yet even while we have increased our geographic spread, we have had to become more specific, with some clients now paying over £24,000 a year for named, dedicated fixers in the multiple cities in which they live. The client and the assigned Quintessentially account manager must have a genuine connection – so there is not just a professional but an emotional understanding. Because in the current market we need to know our top-paying members in unbelievable depth. We sit down and work out what these people are trying to achieve and then go about trying to help them get it right. We make business connections on their behalf. Or, on a more personal level, I currently have a client from Switzerland who is a



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large collector of contemporary art. She wants to extend her knowledge so has asked us to put her in front of the right experts in different parts of the world."

This level of attention means that even the word "concierge" is becoming problematic. "We are becoming more like a family office service," says Cosima Somerset, co-founder of Concierge London, a company with some 200 members serviced by offices in New York and London. This autumn, in fact, Concierge London will change its name to Somerset White. "It's now much more about managing the complex infrastructure of people's lives," says Somerset. "They already have the tax adviser and the financial people. What they don't have is confidence with the lifestyle element. We become the cipher so they can be totally confident in their choices."

The attendant change in pricing underlines Somerset's point. In 2002, Concierge London membership cost £500 a quarter in addition to an hourly rate of £24. Now the company charges an annual membership premium of £10,000 (London) and \$20,000 (New York) while also invoicing by the hour – £40 in the UK, \$80 in the US – on top of this. "If you equate what someone is going to spend with us a year – usually upwards of £30,000 – it's like having an inexpensive PA, except we are more than a PA, rather a team of specialists the client can dip into



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when they like, whether it's to help with relocation, a holiday or planning a party overseas."

This level of distinction is a long way on from the apocryphal stories of old, even if we have all enjoyed being regaled with those concierge tales of private dinners on an iceberg, or sourcing 12 penguins for a child's birthday party. Ten Lifestyle talks about shipping in a bagpipe player to Mallorca, while New York-based travel fixer Bill Fischer claims to have had camels shampooed for a birthday party in Marrakech. Sure, there are a few small and very lucrative services that answer the quirks and extremes of a celebrity clientele, but, according to Somerset, it's not so much about delivering on what seems an impossible request, but rather getting the core demands absolutely right.

"If we organise a party," says Somerset, "I always make sure two of our team are in the background for the client all night – on hand to change the morning's

itinerary. Because that's what nearly always happens. At 2am, the client realises they want to switch the tennis lesson and instead hire a yacht. And so we are there, changing itineraries at dawn."

The villa holiday is another example that illustrates the kind of attention such members expect. "We don't just show them pictures, or reach out to other agencies to get their recommendations on which house to hire in St Barths," says Somerset. "We go and do recces ourselves. We stay the night. We talk to the chef. We try the mattress, because that's what the client will ask us about every time. It's not uncommon for our clients to spend a considerable sum on our travel before they have even had a night in the villa themselves."

If mattress-testing is what it has now come to in the finessing of an industry that is defined by its ability to edit the world for its clients, then maybe the phrase "family office" is right. Because that little book of trusted local knowledge really does count – and now more than ever when Google delivers scores of nationwide plumbing companies with a single search, or 600 private islands, all of which are for hire with the usual

accoutrements of luxury – infinity pools, butlers, 200-thread-count bed linen – which the layman cannot possibly be expected to decipher authoritatively for themselves. Only the "family office" knows what the "family office" likes. Like the best PA in the world, professional fixers have to make themselves indispensable to an inner circle that delivers focus, not more choice. It is their job to make sure that a fool is never made of the client, which is the worst possible complaint that can be levelled at any concierge-style service, however basic the membership (I remember in New York once being recommended the "best Japanese restaurant in town", and ended up at a second-rate, over-hyped address nobody cared about – least of all my guest).

Every city has its neighbourhoods – smaller enclaves each with its own set of rules, significant schools, restaurants and streets that carry a certain weight with just a single numerical difference to the zip code. The über-filter matches the "blow-in" (as they call

newcomers to my part of the world) to the right street, house, colourist, gym, masseur, gardener, domestic help, garage, that bag, that car, that caterer or even that table. As Aaron Simpson, Quintessentially's other co-founder, said to me when the service was first

launched, "A bigwig in New York may not be a bigwig in London. We get them the access they need."

Not everyone likes to admit to their insecurities, but shortcuts to the local social networks are also part of the so-called "lifestyle management" matrix. This is emotionally-weighted, taste-specific stuff – deep filters that underpin a trend not just confined to concierge territory. Busy people want their information reliably digested, and digested again – just look at the success of publications such as *The Week* – and their city guides reduced to minimum choice. It is in response to such trends that Globalista, a members-based travel service, is currently developing its new G-spot Guides for Christmas that deliver just five restaurants, three hotels, six shops, all visitable in a weekend. Like this magazine's Smooth Guides, "It's about ruthless curation for people who don't have the time to do it for themselves," says Globalista's founder, John Gordon. And shallow this



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phenomenon is not, but simply brief and to the point. Because it seems we even want our culture in bite-sized chunks, to inform and entertain the time-poor with the most effective hit possible. London-based 5x15 is a good example – a brilliant concept of five 15-minute talks delivered by significant voices (with an occasional musical interlude), from author Mark Haddon on swimming to William Fiennes on the art of storytelling. Then there are the professional house declutterers, from Sophie March in London to Get It Together in New York. In almost every aspect of our lives, we want to claw back time by outsourcing to people who know exactly what's what. "We take a blank sheet of paper and dig and dig and dig until we get the itinerary so perfectly tuned we remove all the little and annoying decisions from the client," says Philippe Brown, founder and owner of travel outfitter Brown + Hudson. The business, now three years old, currently creates around 30 trips this year, at an average £50,000 price tag per person. "We are in effect the travel extension of the family office," he says.

George Morgan-Grenville, former group managing director of global tour operator Abercrombie & Kent, who this month launches a new travel outfitter, Red Savannah, is less grandiose: "This level of service is about knowing the right people on the ground, then making the right match," he explains. "That said, it's not as easy as it sounds. It takes years to build up the local contacts, which is why everyone at Red Savannah has a minimum 10 years' experience." When it comes to clients, Morgan-Grenville says it takes just as long to know their quirks – "especially when Red Savannah isn't trying to deliver obvious gold-tipped luxury for every traveller, but something that's much more intelligent, such as a

three-star hotel outfitted to a client's basic standard of acceptability in an extraordinary part of the world."

If that's the line every tour operator gives, with Morgan-Grenville you can be sure he's only going back into the travel game in order to edit the world as ruthlessly as possible. "We don't want to be ubiquitous. We regard ourselves as a travel company for people who instinctively know. Our purpose is to make the world a smaller, more interesting place for people far too well travelled to have anyone waste their time."

A smaller world – it's a dictum we will likely hear more of in the years to come as specialisation helps bring us so-called "globizens" back into line, with real "fixing" no longer about those quick-hit relationships with clients who just want a certain villa at Christmas at Sandy Lane, or that table in a certain restaurant with two hours' notice on a Friday night. Keep the numbers limited and the likes of Elliot, Somerset, Brown and Morgan-Grenville can keep a grip on the nuances of their top payers – and encourage a deep relationship that has the longevity and gravitas to command the premium price tags. For my part, I'd pay any middleman a fee just not to miss an issue of my little black book – that small, free and entirely purposeful *Marshwood Vale Magazine* I really, truly, can't live without. \*

#### SIFT WORKERS

**Brown + Hudson**, 020-3358 0110; [www.browndanahudson.com](http://www.browndanahudson.com).

**Concierge London**, 020-7736 2244; [www.concierge-london.co.uk](http://www.concierge-london.co.uk).

**Get It Together**, +1403-813 0067; [www.get-it-together.com](http://www.get-it-together.com).

**Globalista**, 020-7243 9066; [www.globalista.co.uk](http://www.globalista.co.uk).

**Quintessentially**, 0845-388 4329; [www.quintessentially.com](http://www.quintessentially.com).

**Red Savannah**, [www.redsavannah.com](http://www.redsavannah.com), **Sophie March**, 020

8878 2402; [www.sophiemarch.com](http://www.sophiemarch.com), **Ten Lifestyle Concierge**,

0845-020 5270; [www.tenlifestyle.com](http://www.tenlifestyle.com), **5x15**, [www.5x15.com](http://www.5x15.com).