

In need of an assistant?

Concierge completes your busy-work for you



Ramon Mena Owens, The Desert Sun

Anne Barrett of La Quinta (left) and Jessica Petty of Bermuda Dunes, employees of Conciant lifestyle concierge in Rancho Mirage, wrap gifts for Conciant clients.

CONCIANT LIFESTYLE CONCIERGE

Headquarters: Rancho Mirage

Started: 2003

Founder: Valerie Castle, chief executive officer

Employees: 34 (full- and part-time)

What it does: Provides full range of personal services on a per-use or membership basis, including travel booking, housekeeping supervision, scheduling and running errands, and event planning. Also offers corporate services.

Information: 770-0999; www.conciant.com.

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Lou Hirsh

The Desert Sun

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Sasson Sarooei's father-in-law was coming to town, and Sarooei had plans to take his wife and in-law on a trip to Napa Valley wine country. One highlight would be a visit to an exclusive restaurant he'd frequented on past visits to one of his favorite parts of California.

But with just hours to go before the drive from his Woodland Hills home to Napa, Sarooei found out the restaurant was booked for the entire weekend, and getting in would be next to impossible. He then put in a call to Conciant, a Rancho Mirage-based concierge service he had joined in May, to see if personnel there could help him out.

"The concierge service was able to set me up with the restaurant reservations," said Sarooei, an always-busy software developer. "They called me in my car on the way to Napa."

"They apparently know some people," he added.

Sarooei is among about 1,200 using the upscale services of Conciant Lifestyle Concierge. The company was started about three years ago in the home of its founder, chief executive Valerie Castle, who recently established a new headquarters office on Highway 111 in Rancho Mirage.

In the Coachella Valley especially, Castle said she has found increasing demand for the company's services - for instance, housekeeping and maintenance supervision of upscale homes owned by part-time valley residents.

"People don't want to come back to the desert and find out that a water pipe has broken and flooded everything," said Castle, 41, a 25-year valley resident. "They don't want to come home to a yard or garden that hasn't been tended for weeks, like what happened to me once."

The tasks done by Castle's 34 full- and part-time workers include the usual errands like shopping, wrapping holiday gifts, walking the dogs and picking up the dry cleaning. But thanks to the Internet, some specialized software and a network of contacts, the company has moved into more specialized lifestyle areas.

Does that pooch have a biting problem? Castle's company can arrange to have him seen by an animal behaviorist. Is your equestrian stable out of hay? Conciant's helpers know how to reach and deal with all the horse-need suppliers.

The business now provides a full range of personal services on a per-use or membership basis, including travel and event-ticket booking, housekeeping supervision, and meal and party planning. It also offers corporate services, which Castle said are often used by employers as a luxury perk to attract and retain staff.

For instance, in the company's Urbanity Preferred program, which Castle said is its most popular, customers get unlimited access to services for an individual membership fee of \$4,075 annually (which includes the \$575 joining fee) or a couples/partnership fee of \$5,575 annually.

Castle is a veteran of the direct marketing business, and was a partner in the late 1990s in the startup of K-Tel Direct Media & Marketing, a subsidiary of K-Tel International, which was famous in the 1970s and 1980s for its omnipresent TV ads for all-star music collections.

A former executive with the industry leading Guthy Renker direct marketing firm now headquartered in Palm Desert, Castle ultimately wanted to turn her experience in that field into a way to improve the customer service she was receiving at various times in her own busy life.

"I really thought there was a better way to do this - to do customer service in a way that people will be more than glad to pay for, to have this kind of help in their lives."

Castle said maintaining relationships with vendors and hiring the right people are the key factors that have helped her business grow clientele.

She has found many employees who enjoy being able to work from their own homes, since the Internet and phone are a big part of the work they do. But Castle has strict background checks for workers, who are not permitted to accept gratuities and must sign job performance agreements to maintain the company's service standards.

Conciant represents part of a growing national movement by businesses to serve increasingly busy families trying to balance work and personal responsibilities.

Hard data is hard to come by. But Entrepreneur.com recently reported that membership in the National Association of Professional Organizers, which includes professional concierges, grew from a few hundred in 1985 to more than 1,100 members by the late 1990s.

According to Cathedral City resident Richard Rennick, chairman of the Washington, D.C.-based International Franchise Association, a big trend hitting the franchise world is companies catering to the needs of time-strapped families. They are performing tasks like preparing meals, chauffeuring kids to soccer practice and running miscellaneous household errands.

In the future, Sarooei said he also plans to use the Conciant service to set up travel and activity arrangements for visiting relatives and business colleagues.

"It's kind of like having a niece or nephew you can call on to get all of this stuff done," he said.