

EXPAT CONCIERGE

A GROWING TREND

BY MOLLY QUELL

LIANE DIERCKX IS A VETERAN EXPAT. SHE'S LIVED ALL OVER EUROPE. BUT IT TOOK THE BELGIAN NATIVE NEARLY TWO YEARS TO GET FULLY SETTLED IN THE NETHERLANDS AND, AS SHE ADMITS, SHE ALREADY SPOKE DUTCH. VOWING TO HELP HER FELLOW TRANSPLANTS AVOID HER STRUGGLES, SHE LAUNCHED DIERCKX & DIERCKX, A PERSONAL CONCIERGE SERVICE SPECIALIZING IN EXPATS.

'Concierge' is French for 'gatekeeper' or 'keeper of the keys', a term traditionally reserved for a person employed by an apartment building or hotel who helps tenants do everything from carrying luggage to making dinner reservations. In apartments, they frequently serve as go-betweens to communicate the needs of the residents to the company managing the building; in hotels, they typically assist guests with travel arrangements, restaurant reservations and advice on local services.

As travel became more common in the 18th and 19th centuries, the demand for concierges increased. Hotel guests required staff to serve as a bridge between travelers and the local economy. Concierges spoke the local language and were familiar with local customs, in an era long before translation software and Lonely Planet.

By the middle of the 20th century, hospitals also began to recognize the value of the concierge, as people traveled farther for specialized medical care. These medical concierges also helped families organize suggested local restaurants, allowing them to focus on caring for their loved ones.





the concierge concept, companies that specialized in the personal concierge market emerged. In today's fast-paced world, these services have rapidly grown in popularity. Unsurprisingly, much growth in the personal concierge market has been focused on expats, a group of people who, more than almost any other, need assistance with everyday tasks in a new culture.

Relocation is challenging, whether you're moving to another city or another continent. This is particularly true of expats who struggle with a language barrier in addition to needing certain goods or services and not knowing where to look.

Dierckx experienced challenges relocating a mere 50 miles (80 km), from Brussels to The Hague, 10 years ago.

"Really getting settled," she says, "took about one-and-a-half years." It was more than finding a place to live and good schools for her children. Dierckx struggled with things like finding a reliable housekeeper and a competent hairdresser. Drawing from her experience, she knew there was a market for helping other expats find such services.

Standard relocation services, such as assistance with shipping your belongings and locating housing, can be invaluable to expats. Personal concierge companies like Dierckx & Dierckx, however, specialize in providing more

personal services, such as finding a reliable housekeeper, pet sitter or sports clubs for you and your children. Dierckx & Dierckx even teaches you how to navigate the local public transit system.

"One of our employees will take you to the train station and demonstrate how to use the ticketing system," Dierckx notes.

Beyond simply introducing expats to the Netherlands, her company caters to their long-term needs. As they make frequent trips home, her expat clients often rely on Dierckx to provide house- and pet-sitting services. Her company also assists in guiding expats through sometimes confusing cultural situations, such as selecting the proper gift for a Dutch employer.

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Personal concierge services are popular across Europe, especially in France. The United States and Asia have lagged behind in embracing the personal concierge concept, but the number of providers is growing as global companies require more employees to spend time abroad.

Concierge services, usually a perk enjoyed by the wealthy, have grown in popularity, and the demand for this niche market has begun spreading to the masses of the middle



class. Some companies have retained concierges for their employees. Mercedes Benz USA recently added concierge services as an employee benefit. Employees use a staff concierge to arrange travel plans, car maintenance and other appointments. The service is used heavily during the holiday season when employees enlist concierges to help with gift-purchasing and wrapping. Accounting firms have also made use of the service during tax season, easing the demands on employees so they can focus on their work.

Despite recent economic downturns, demand for these services is growing. Companies that provide many concierge services for onsite staff have found their employees are more productive when they aren't distracted by these tasks.

Dierckx & Dierckx is also expanding its services to the corporate market by arranging for items to be cleaned and repaired, dropping off and picking up dry cleaning, and organizing staff parties. Expats find the service especially helpful, as they often struggle to locate basic service-providers such as tailors, etc.

Fees paid to personal conciergeservices also cover access to the concierge's network of services. Dierckx & Dierckx works closely with 55 local companies to provide their services, ensuring that clients get top-notch experiences from customer-oriented businesses. This even extends to Dierckx's 22-year-old daughter who arranges expat babysitting services.

"I want to have a good relationship with anyone my clients might be interested in," says Dierckx, who occasionally gets odd client requests for services. Among the typical dogs and cats in her charge, for example, are goldfish, horses and two goats. And she once had a client request a personal assistant to accompany them on a three-month trip to several countries – with only three days' notice.

When that happens, Dierckx networks until she finds a reputable company to fulfill the request – or she'll do it herself.

"I have a degree in interior design, I've worked as a chocolatier, and I've owned several businesses," she says. "I can get things done."

For more information, visit www.dierckx-dierckx.nl. ■