

# THE RECORD

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**They sweat the small stuff; Busy people and busy companies create market for concierge firms**

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When people talk about a concierge, most of us probably imagine some nattily dressed fellow at an upscale hotel who makes dinner reservations and books concert tickets for guests.

But in the business world the word has a much broader meaning. Some people, for example, have started businesses that provide concierge services to individuals and companies.

And some large firms hire their own in-house concierges to cater to employees, a service that falls under the broad umbrella of what are sometimes called work-life benefits.

As well, some property developers now offer concierge-type services in their office developments -- similar to those offered at a hotel -- as a way of enticing prospective tenants.

"It's definitely happening in a lot of larger office buildings throughout North America," says local realtor John Whitney of Whitney & Company.

GREAT PERK

"It doesn't cost the tenant any more, but they get a service they wouldn't get in some other building. That's a great perk. The developer is saying this is one of the bonuses of being in this building."

Yet another twist on the theme is the concierge service established last year by Coldwell Banker Peter Benninger Realty at its consumer centre on Riverbend Drive in Kitchener.

It puts customers in touch with companies providing a variety of services related to the buying or selling of a home. These services include facilitating transfers of school records, informing new homeowners of their garbage and recycling pickup days, redirecting mail, and helping them to find a new doctor or dentist, a place of worship or recreational activities.

Concierge services appear to be most evident in large cities, and particularly in the United States. They are "springing up across the country," writes Wayne Tompkins of the Courier-Journal of Louisville, Ky.

The concierge companies have become particularly well established in places like San Jose, Washington and Boston.

"If that list seems familiar, it's because, yes, like so many other things, it's the new-economy companies and their midnight-oil-burning employees who are driving the trend," Tompkins writes.

Some U.S. concierge services bring in big bucks. For example, an Atlanta-based firm, called 2 Places at 1 Time, reported \$3 million in annual revenues last year with 25 offices and 35 employees across North America, serving clients like Motorola and General Electric.

Company president Andrea Martin says she expects annual revenues to grow to about \$3.5 million this year.

ONE PERSON

Locally, there are more modest, one-person ventures.

Judy Forwell, 40, of Kitchener established her concierge service, Keeper of the Keys, about four years ago.

It was a meagre existence in her first year of operation, she says. But her annual revenues before expenses last year came close to \$50,000.

A former call-centre supervisor for Rogers cable and an agency manager for Prudential Insurance, Forwell has four children ages five to 14.

"I started this wanting to spend more time with my kids and to be flexible and be there when they need me."

For a variety of clients, Forwell runs errands, handles dry cleaning, buys groceries and household goods, waits in people's homes for deliveries to arrive, house-sits (including watering plants and feeding pets), buys theatre tickets, orders flowers, arranges airport transportation and takes cars in for servicing.

She is a one-person operation, but sometimes subcontracts work to part-time helpers.

Her business is "strictly word of mouth," she says. "The only thing I've done is my Web site (conciergekwa.ca). I never put out flyers or ads."

One client, former University of Waterloo president Douglas Wright, referred Forwell to one of her corporate accounts, the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Waterloo.

Along with arranging cleaning of its building on weekends, Forwell helps to prepare apartments for visiting scientists, making sure they have items such as toiletries, tea and coffee, snacks, or wine and flowers in some cases. Two scientists at the institute have also retained her services as individuals.

Another of Forwell's corporate accounts is Les Diplomates executive guest house in Waterloo. Owner Hoda Mohtar says Forwell helps her guests with services such as booking car rentals and arranging secretarial work. She also fills in as hostess when Mohtar is away.

"She's very responsible, professional. I trust her fully. I give her the keys to the house and she takes care of the guests," Mohtar says.

#### FORMER LAW CLERK

Another local firm, Cardinal Concierge, is run by Tina Plett, 40, a former law clerk who provides the same sort of services.

Both women charge a standard rate of \$25 an hour.

Plett projects her business will have modest revenues of \$30,000 this year. But she works only part-time while studying human resources management at Conestoga College and eventually hopes to make the business grow.

Plett's one-person business (www.cardinalconciergekwa.com) has about 20 individual clients with plans to garner more corporate accounts. Currently, she arranges Christmas parties for high-tech semiconductor company Dspfactory of Waterloo.

Plett was also recently retained to serve a number of employees at Clarica, part of Sun Life Financial, in Waterloo, as well as to arrange services through subcontractors for other employees in Sun Life's offices in Calgary and Winnipeg.

Plett also works as a subcontractor for a U.S. concierge service whose clients include a Toronto financial institution. She caters to the needs of selected customers of the firm who live in this area.

Debra Hinksman, of TLC Concierge Service in Vancouver, is president of the Canadian chapter of the International Concierge and Errand Association, which has about 150 members, most in the United States.

"The industry in Canada is very new," she says, although Vancouver now has about a dozen companies providing a concierge service.

"I think it's more critical than employers would believe it to be," Hinksman says.

By helping employees cope with the stress of juggling their work and personal lives, she says, "they're actually helping the business."

Hinksman, a former United Church minister, says she started her business partly because it combines earning a living with her more altruistic streak.

"I needed that to give me a sense of mission," she says. "Most people in the concierge business are in it because they like helping people."

Plett agrees: "I do get great satisfaction in helping other people and that's why I've entered into this. I wasn't getting satisfaction as a law clerk."

Similarly, Forwell says: "It's almost a motherly role you take. You have to have a helping spirit."

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