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Concierges Get New Marching Orders

*Once emblems of
conspicuous
consumption,
concierges are
repositioning
themselves. Now they
help clients with the
nuts and bolts of their
downsized lives.*

By VIVIAN S. TOY

THE phones are still ringing at the desks of residential concierges around the city, but the conversations have a different timbre than they did before the recession was officially declared.

The days of seemingly carefree excess are gone. In their place are requests that involve quieter times spent more economically and very likely closer to home.

Instead of reservations at Daniel or Per Se, residents are asking their concierges for recommendations for more reasonably priced neighborhood restaurants.

Instead of holding a party for their 100 closest friends at a club, they're opting for a dinner party at home for 20.

Instead of center orchestra seats at the Met, any seats are fine as long as they're on opening night.

Instead of a long weekend at Canyon Ranch, maybe a day at the Cornelia Day Resort will do the trick.

Free wine-and-cheese mixers presented by the concierge service that might have drawn at most a dozen people in the fall are now pulling in upward of 60 people, as residents — especially those who have recently lost jobs or who are afraid they might be next to get laid off — look for new ways to network.

Concierges in high-end condos and rental buildings say they are as busy as they ever have been and in some cases, even busier.

"In this new economy, people seem very eager to enjoy what they

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New Marching Orders

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purchased and to buckle down and enjoy their surroundings," said Michael Fazio, a co-founder of Abigail Michaels Concierge, which serves about 90 buildings in the city, primarily in rentals.

His partner, Abigail Newman, agreed. The changes in the kinds of things that their residents ask for have been subtle, she said. "It's not like the sky is falling; things have just shifted a bit," she said. "And a lot of it is about coming home and cocooning and feeling like you're in a nest."

The number of requests for catering at home, for example, has increased by 20 percent, she said, ranging from hiring a bartender for a few hours to bringing in a chef and staff to prepare and serve a meal.

While residents may not come straight out and ask for reservations at a restaurant with less than ruinous prices, "they might say: 'We want to go someplace simple,'" Mr. Fazio said. "It's our job to understand that what's being unspoken is: 'We don't necessarily want to drop \$200 a person, so please find us that hidden gem of a place that we haven't been to yet.'"

Heidi Horsley, who lives at the Element at 555 West 59th Street with her husband and two children, said, "We're definitely much more careful on what we're spending as far as going out to higher-end restaurants and even on how often we go out and where we sit when we go to the theater."

She said she was also paying more attention to the e-mail messages that the concierge occasionally sends highlighting discounts at Broadway shows or other events.

Mr. Fazio said that his company had tracked resident response to those messages and that the percentage of residents who opened them had recently jumped to 50 percent from 30.

Concierges who mainly serve high-end condo buildings also report a shift in the way their residents are choosing to spend their money.

Tony Abrams, the president of Four Hundred, which works with residents in about 10 condos where apartment prices start at \$2,500 to \$3,000 per square foot, said that requests for private jets had dropped off and that clients who might have flown privately were flying first class instead.

Even so, he said, he recently booked a \$75,000 trip to Los Cabos, Mexico, for a client and his family. "There's still a psychological need to continue to live their lives the way they're used to," Mr. Abrams said. "And if they're going to splurge, they're going to splurge on themselves and their families."

Luxury Attaché, which provides concierge service at 15 buildings where apartments sell for no less than \$2.5 mil-

lion, is using its relationships with retailers and service providers to secure bulk discounts for clients. Jenene Danenberg, the company's founder, said that meant helping to provide an additional night free to a couple headed to a Caribbean resort for three nights or getting residents access to invitation-only designer shopping events. "These are sample sales for the superduper high end," Ms. Danenberg said. "They're not going to the garment district and waiting on line."

In buildings like 170 East End, 141 Fifth Avenue and 15 Union Square West, she said, residents are still traveling, but "they're looking for more value and they're shortening trips." The weekend jaunt to Anguilla may be replaced by a few nights at a quaint inn in Litchfield, Conn., and a "guys' weekend" in Las Vegas may become "a crazy suite at the Borgata" in Atlantic City.

Buildings with concierges typically introduce the service to buyers and renters when they sign their contracts or leases and urge the residents to use the concierges as they prepare to move in.

In condos, the developers usually provide the service for a year or two as an amenity, and after that the condo board can vote to continue the service and increase maintenance fees to pay for it. In rental buildings, the cost is included in the rent or is an additional charge.

Where residents pay for the service, the cost to individuals can be as little as several hundred dollars a year or as much as several hundred dollars a month, depending on the size of the building and the level of service provided.

For buildings still under construction, some developers see concierge services as a cost-effective way to maintain a certain quality of life for residents.

Stephen Kliegerman, the executive director of development marketing for Halstead Property, said that at one project still under construction, "we decided to scale down the gym and eliminate the pool, but we added in the concierge because it's a service that helps us stay competitive without taking away from the sellable square footage in the building."

Many residents of new buildings use the concierge services to facilitate their moves. Andy Levinson, who moved into the Avery at 100 Riverside Boulevard last April, said he used the concierge service provided by Abigail Michaels to set up his electricity and cable service.



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DIAL A PARTY
Abigail Michaels Concierge, above, hums along. An affiliate planned a party for Brian and Carly Snyder, at far left with baby Zachary. Left, Andy Levinson and Jessica Fishman enjoy free events staged by the service in their building.

Requests for private jets have dropped off. Clients are flying first class.

Then, when he decided he wanted to install a shower door, he sent an e-mail message to the concierge and received several recommendations for contractors. "It was much better than just Googling 'shower doors in New York City,' which would have given me 14,000 results and I wouldn't have known where to start," he said.

Mr. Levinson, a lawyer who was recently laid off from Tishman Speyer's real estate development division and is now hoping to go into real estate consulting, said he and his fiancée, Jessica Fishman, attended their first building mixer last month — a flamenco performance in the building's theater with a wine-and-cheese reception. "I'm hoping they'll do more things like that, because it was a good time and it was free," he said. "In times like these, that's definitely a good thing when it's free."

Residents have also called upon concierge services to find other ways to

help them live their lives more thriftily. Ms. Newman said one of her concierges had also been asked to find a reliable shoe repair shop to handle 10 to 15 pairs of designer shoes at a time. "We never got that kind of volume before," she said. "People used to buy shoes at that rate, not get them refurbished."

Requests for personal shoppers have also changed. Instead of booking someone for a shopping trip to Bergdorf Goodman, Ms. Newman said, residents "are now shopping in their own closets, so they're restructuring what they have — maybe taking shoulder pads out of the Guy Laroche suit or hemming that Armani skirt."

When Dr. Carly Snyder wanted to give a surprise birthday party for her husband, Brian, she went to Jessica Jacobson, one of the concierges at Oval Concierge, the Abigail Michaels service at Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town.

She first asked for suggestions on

how to plan an event for 20 people at home, but that proved to be too expensive. "So then I wanted to find a place that wouldn't break the bank," Dr. Snyder said. Ms. Jacobson suggested Public, a NoLiTa restaurant where the Snyders had eaten before. Dr. Snyder had never thought of it for a private party, but she liked the idea.

Because Dr. Snyder is an intern in psychiatry at Beth Israel Medical Center, "I didn't have time during the day to pick up the phone to speak to someone about the menu," she said. So she relied on Ms. Jacobson to handle all the details, and the party went off without a hitch last month.

Concierge service owners say clients are requesting more help with mundane tasks, like finding someone to wait for the handyman to arrive so they don't have to steal time from work.

Sharon Beason, the owner of All About Brooklyn Concierge, said more clients were asking for help with picking up the mail while they are away on business and making sure the refrigerator is stocked when they get back.

"Our clients are working longer hours," she said, "so we're getting more requests for everyday kinds of services. People are definitely more mindful about how they spend their time and money."