

This cannot be true



This is a business that is all about customer service. Customers call up and they ask for the impossible, (or something very close to it) and they don't expect "no" for an answer. And they keep on making extraordinary demands, all day long, every day of the year, to a team of multi-lingual customer service specialists, based in the South of England. The requests are extraordinary, but the most surprising thing is that no money is asked for in providing the answers.

One specialist is on the phone, checking out importation regulations for zebra into Brazil, another busy faxing diagrammes, while another is translating the conversation of a tourist to a French petrol station owner. A wealthy Brazilian businessman is anxious to have his call returned and learn if the zebra will arrive in time for his wife's birthday. A highly stressed executive, due to give an important after dinner speech, doesn't know how to tie a bow tie. An English couple in France have run out of petrol in a national park, don't speak the language, and are not sure where they are.

Sounds like a crazy business? Surely it can't be true, and yet it is. From its offices in Cambridgeshire, as long as it's legal and ethical, WhiteConcierge provides concierge and lifestyle management on behalf of its clients: corporate customers who wish to ensure that their very important customers are well looked after, wherever they are. The package for each corporate client consists of customised services that can vary in their depth and breadth depending on individual requirements. If this is information, or something that can be sourced for free, it is offered at no charge. The requests can be of almost any nature at all: some are related to 'rescue services' when a customer is in particular difficulty and needing urgent support, and others are simply challenging assignments that the customer doesn't know how to answer – from finding a unique birthday present, organising extraordinary travel arrangements to help in completing a best man's speech.

WhiteConcierge's corporate clients pay for this service as a benefit to their customers, either as part of a value added service proposition or as a gift to increase their loyalty. The end customer does not know that it is WhiteConcierge on the phone: they attribute the extraordinary service to the corporate client – such as their credit card provider, airline loyalty programme, property developer or business partner.

Originally a division of Travelex, WhiteConcierge was acquired in 2007 by Jonathan Breeze, together with an Austrian private bank. Its 120 employees serve around a million customers in 25 languages, on behalf of corporate clients in the financial services, telecoms, travel, employee benefits and luxury goods sectors.

In the summer of 2007, the newly formed business unit set about pursuing initiatives aimed at attaining EFQM 'Committed to Excellence' status. Despite the bespoke nature of the services being proposed by WhiteConcierge, process and quality management are key issues in running the business. Firstly, corporate clients need to be sure that they are entrusting a key part of their customer service to a reliable partner. The banks in particular need to be absolutely sure that the confidential financial

information of their customers is held securely and used appropriately. In addition, the demand pattern on the specialists is highly variable and the nature of the requests cannot be predicted, so a core competence is to manage processes according to urgency and offer a reliable response time to the customer.

Even if process management is so important, the first priority in 2007 when WhiteConcierge set about defining its 'Journey to Excellence' was to look at people engagement issues. Chris Jell, Director of Operations, explains this priority:

"Although we had been in operation for over ten years, our ambition was to reconsider how we could improve and position ourselves for continued growth in demand for global concierge services. We chose three initial areas of priority: formulating and communicating our policy and strategy, establishing a system of KPI's and developing a communications strategy."

The requests handled by our people are extraordinary and we expect an extraordinary thing from them: to cope with many varied and sometimes implausible requests at the same time from some very demanding customers and to do so with patience and motivation. We also need them to be creative and adaptable to change: it's important for us to remain very agile and to develop new services and in-house competencies when required. That requires us to develop the trust of our staff, and engage them in the strategy and organisation of what we do."

An improved Knowledge Management tool was the centre piece of implementing a response to these priorities: staff share information on customer activities and services and track the performance of the business versus KPI's on a continuous basis. In early 2009, WhiteConcierge was proud to achieve 'Committed to Excellence' status. Marie Sugarman, Quality Manager, comments: "'Committed to Excellence' has helped us set up the necessary momentum, passion and commitment to drive change and improvement within our business. We are already taking steps to ensure our journey to Excellence continues and will look to achieve 'Recognised for Excellence' too as part of our ongoing business improvements."