

SUNDAY
business and pleasure



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Cash-rich but time-poor?
You might need a lifestyle
concierge. Jasper Gerard
meets the London blades
who want to be your Jeeves

DREAMY were the days when all the world had a butler. It was also really rather balmy in that long forgotten epoch when we all had secretaries. Now, alas, many of us – swanky sorts included – have to do ourselves all those tiresome tasks that were once taken care of by an old buffer in tails or a peachy young thing in pearls. So rather than devoting our highly-trained minds to the important matter of earning money, we waste half the day waiting for Le Caprice to pick up its telephone or negotiating the Tiffany website.

A whole host of entrepreneurs has scented a business opportunity in our cash-rich, time-short existences. When your car needs a new exhaust, you don't fix it yourself. When you want to buy a house, you visit a chap in braces called Giles. And these days, when you don't have time to run your life, a company does it for you.

Initially that sounds rather alarming but the population of the United Kingdom works the longest hours in Europe and, according to the Henley Centre, 63 per cent of us claim not to have enough time to get things done.

Quintessentially, a membership club, is one of these 'lifestyle concierge' companies that have sprung from nowhere to take advantage of our indolence, our lack of time, our little emergencies – and our craving to be seen at the best places. Not as sinister as those companies hired as 'corporate concierges' to manage over-worked employees' lives, Quintessentially tends to look after after the luxury end of life. As well as doing all the obvious things like booking

restaurants, concerts and holidays, and unclamping our cars, the high-class fixers from Quintessentially are on the end of the phone 24 hours a day to answer our most preposterous questions and solve our most intractable problems. Founded by a pair of sleek London blades, funded by City money, it boasts plutocrats, pop stars and more than the odd poser among its fashionable membership. While tediously discreet about its list, creatures as diverse as *Harry Potter* creatrix JK Rowling and former Labour minister Geoffrey Robinson are said to be members. Robinson is rumoured to have been interested in investing in Quintessentially: unlike Peter Mandelson, however, its founders apparently said no.

Hurdles that Quintessentially has successfully jumped include smoothing through a Paris wedding for a woman keen to get married the following day who didn't have the requisite licence, rescuing within hours a distressed rally driver and four cars from an over-gruelling race in Sweden, and sending a doctor, medicine and flowers in a limousine to the ailing girlfriend of a member. "The girl was about to chuck him," says founder Ben Elliot. "I don't know if the relationship survived. Some aspects of peoples' lives you have to leave to the member. But I understand the girlfriend was amazed."

The headquarters of Quintessentially still bear the graffiti of anti-capitalist demonstrators who

recently marched through the West End. Had the anarchists done their market research, they surely would have done rather more than daub a few slogans. In taking care of the luxury end of life, Quintessentially represents everything a good revolutionary should despise: self-indulgence, capitalism and, above all, materialism at its most decadent. It is also rather posh.

Lucia van der Post, daughter of the guru forever associated with the Prince of Wales (a sort of Eileen Drewery for the upper classes), edits a magazine that advises members of hip new things. Number One Aldwych's elegant Gordon Campbell-Gray is a consultant and another senior sort is Tom Parker Bowles, who one day just might be the prince's stepson. The founders are film producer Aaron 'Mad Cows' Simpson and Elliot, whose name will be known to members of Fulham's embarrassingly-named Funset Strip as a founder of both the K-Bar and the Fluid juice bars. A cousin of Parker Bowles, Elliot recounts how at Eton he interviewed Margaret Thatcher for the school magazine. She demanded that he play his tape to prove it worked. Ben refused; the night before Parker Bowles had recorded his (rather unflattering) thoughts on the recently-deposed Prime Minister.

The office retains the aura of a public school common room, with lots of casually dressed but smartly brought up young things tapping away at computers, and a few older sorts – looking rather like classics masters – padding about in the background (distressed uncles who have squandered their inheritances, perhaps).

The heart of the company is a 24-hour multilingual switchboard, manned – and, if you will allow the word, womanned – by an army of 15 trouble-shooters. They are rather different from your typical BT operator ("Harrods? Which town is that in?"), priding themselves on being able to answer just about any question, rather like the sadly-defunct Telegraph Information Service. The bank of information is growing rapidly but some questions just can't be planned for. "We have queries on everything from what time is sunset, to where is the best place to buy a bed in London," says Simpson, who points out that the firm makes no money out of being everyone's personal oracle.

The firm may hint at a dotcom start-up (and trades from the www.quintessentially.com site) but before alarm bells clang, Elliot insists that the call centre is more integral to the business than the internet. Simpson says there is an even split: "We field about 4,000 calls a month and that is roughly the same as e-mails." Elliot says: "We could have started the company without the internet. Clearly it is a tool that is used by many members, but it would have worked through printed literature and the telephone. We are not called Quintessentially.com."

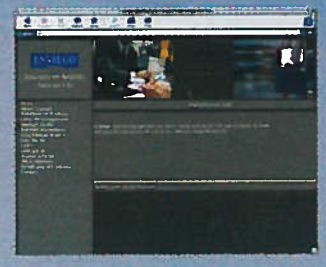
Shrewd, considering the dwindling share price and declining fashionability of new media stocks. Quintessentially received about £1.2m initially from Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, Goldman Sachs executive Simon Robertson,





Quintessentially (0800 015 6996) is one of a number of lifestyle management companies. Frequent requests include a good cleaner, an entertainer for a children's party or sourcing theatre tickets.

Bizarre requests to such companies include sourcing a pair of trousers like those worn by Lufthansa cargo handlers, arranging for three Ferraris to be driven from Geneva to the south of France, organising the cremation of a horse, finding two tarantulas for a training session to overcome arachnophobia and shipping a pet cockatoo to Zagreb.



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sportswear retailer Tom Hunter and the GUS e-commerce subsidiary Reality, and has secured additional funding in the past fortnight. It lists tie-ins with various smart shops with the promise that if you live within the M25 and order something by noon it will be with you by dusk. About 20 per cent of members buy regularly on-line, which has enabled Quintessentially to negotiate discounts. It admits to receiving a cut, but insists that is "small". "Revenue comes from the members," says Simpson. "That way they can trust what we say." Suppliers include Moët Hennessy, Ian Schrager Hotels, the Savoy Group and Agent Provocateur. These guys are no Arthur Daleys and in so far as you can trust anyone else's taste, they are probably a good bet. But for Quintessentially – and rival companies – to be worth joining, potential members will need to be convinced that they offer tangible benefits. That means access to places they might not otherwise get into or even hear about, and discounts and preferably special service once inside. Will the Quintessentially team be able to deliver?

"Aaron's background was film production, mine was the bar world [Breezers, not briefs] so we didn't think we had enough contacts in the luxury goods world," admits Elliot, looking back to last year when they founded the company. That is why they appointed Van der Post for her "fastidious attention to detail" (i.e. a nose that sniffs out anything that isn't pukka).

"The idea was to take the best of American

service culture," says Simpson. "But we were aware that this often falls down if the customer attempts to go off-script. We are very off-script."

Elliot adds: "There is a very famous Italian designer who, whenever he comes to London, gets upgraded in a hotel. He couldn't get into a show he wanted, or to Nobu, and we facilitated those. At first there were a few areas that we did not cover but now pretty well anything you want to do, we will be able to organise: anything from seeing a film before it is released to meeting artists prior to their exhibition."

So what kind of people join? "Our members are an eclectic bunch, from politicians to best-selling authors to fashion designers to DJs to film stars," says Elliot. "To be honest we did not know if those sorts of people would want our services. They might say, 'Oh, I have a PA'. But now we find that where someone has a PA, we simply have the PA ringing us."

Quintessentially, though, would not succeed if its membership list consisted of a handful of stars and high rollers, however celebrated. That is why the bread and butter members are, and will remain, harassed executives. "There are lots of people who have been told they can't do anything to do with their personal life in work time," says Elliot. Conditions have grown more draconian, as have the hours. "People are increasingly pissed off about the lack of time they have to do anything," says Elliot.

This is also why the company is not snobbish about potential members. If someone

wants to pay their £400 membership with their platinum card, or from their Bradford and Bingley Liquid Saver account, it's all money to Quintessentially. Still, one can imagine the letters that must have been dispatched to Old Etonians and old survivors from the Funset Strip. "We were a company with nothing," says Elliot frankly. "So we put a lot of work into building quite a large database of people who we thought might be good ambassadors."

Were event organisers, hotels and restaurants as welcoming from the start? "We were told by a lot of people to f*** off," admits Parker Bowles. "We did a lot of leg work. But now we are finding that those people are coming back to us and we can treat them accordingly."

The final member of the Quintessential quartet is Luca Del Bono, one of those Italians who seem more impeccably English than the English. Hailing from a family of hoteliers, he is the man who ensures that anyone travelling through the company feels pampered: "So when they arrive in their room, it should have their favourite type of Champagne, their favourite newspaper, their favourite sort of pillow."

Which is all very charming, but relatively easy to arrange. If I were to join, I challenge them, could they secure me a table for lunch today at the Ivy? "We can't guarantee the Ivy but we can offer a brilliant alternative," Parker Bowles admits. This might be helpful for the tourist or country visitor, but is arguably of limited use to the regular restaurant

goer already familiar with other joints. Again, can Quintessentially save a member money? Certainly it can appeal to (bulging) wallets with certain benefits. It claims to offer reduced rates at Champneys, for example, and the London Capital Club. The company reckons there are potentially £10,000 worth of discounts available to members (though clearly to benefit from that level of saving, you need to spend a lot of bunce in the process).

But in true British upper middle class fashion, the company says the services it offers are concerned with value for money, not vulgar consumption: "It is all about quality, not about price," says Simpson. Membership stands at about 1,200 but Simpson hopes it will grow to 4,000 by the end of the year. The information line offers free advice to members but payment for a plumber, say, is met by the member over and above the £400 annual fee.

Quintessentially knows about the pitfalls. That's why the emphasis is on quality rather than fashion, lest the company is perceived as somewhat ephemeral. Membership loyalty – particularly when it comes to the all-important moment for renewing annual subscriptions – will depend on the personal touch, both when dealing with the company and with firms with whom Quintessentially has put members in touch. Which is what, Elliot reckons, differentiates Quintessentially from rivals such as American Express. Ideally, the concierge of the Savoy would identify a Quintessential member and offer him or her that slightly better treatment. So it does make sense – at least in principle –

– but if you are some swank who, in the jargon, is time-poor, then why not?

Membership of Quintessentially will also get you past the velvet rope and into a giddy social whirl of fun parties, restaurant openings and ultra-exclusive Champagne tastings. The social aspect of the club is important and this is where Parker Bowles excels. The former film PR was the victim of a tabloid drug sting at Cannes; in person, he is charming, clever and demure. That said, he knows how to enjoy himself and those who have attended Quintessentially bashes give the thumbs up. "There are so many boring parties, we try to be really innovative," he says. Elliot is more blunt: "We want to cut the crap."

And that, Quintessentially claims, involves securing tickets to see Madonna, the recent FA Cup Final and ever-popular junkets such as Grand Prix. "We look at events before anyone thinks of them so we can book out an entire hotel – from Glastonbury to Glyndebourne."

There have been attempts by a Scandinavian outfit to take over the company, but the overtures were rejected. Next step is to launch a Quintessentially credit card ('the only card you will need') and there is talk of setting up a club in London along with a small hotel. American and Hong Kong markets will also be targeted.

Currently, 60 per cent of members are UK based, with a 50:50 split between the sexes. It may prove to be academic but Elliot has given much thought to how much the company should grow without losing exclusivity. "There is still plenty of room for organic growth but there is a danger with a firm like Burberry of

We all know of people who have negotiated a price cut at a hotel but how many want the embarrassment?

to take advantage of a service that does all those things once taken care of by peachy Miss Jones.

Will the entrepreneurs succeed? Dan Conaghan of New Media Spark, which secures investment for start-ups, has his doubts. "If joining this would get me a table at the Ivy or membership of White's, it might be worthwhile. But you hardly need to be a duchess to gain membership to some places in its portfolio, so why do I need to join Quintessentially? Similar things have been tried and quietly disappeared a year later. That said, its bump all looks very professional and people such as Ben Elliot have a good record."

Still, there is justification for Conaghan's hesitation. Some of the places in Quintessentially's portfolio are crying out for publicity and members. Equally, however, other venues such as the restaurant Nobu are genuinely top-notch. Whatever its usefulness for native sorts not under the corporate cosh, there should still be a demand among those who do not know much about Britain (and Britons who travel and need to know about exotic outposts) and those who do not want to be troubled. After all, while we all know of people who have negotiated a price cut at a top hotel, how many of us want the embarrassment?

And then there is the time factor: I have little respect for those who hire interior decorators – it suggests more money than taste

losing a certain cachet. Equally, I look at a company like Barbour and wonder why it has not done more to exploit its name."

Simpson says: "We don't have a ceiling for membership, but if we reach 4,000 members and discover we can't service them properly anymore, we will stop recruiting."

This service will not appeal to all. There are those who enjoy discovering on their own, be it the funky new restaurant that has yet to be charted by the style police, or the holiday advertised in the back of the Australasian free sheet that is half the price and twice the fun of anything a travel agent has to offer. But for those who feel deep jealousy towards their forebears for being able to employ a gentleman's gentleman, this company could prove to be a most congenial way to change your life. ■

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