

Harnessing the secret to front-of-house services

First Contact is demonstrating that service principles from the hospitality industry are well-suited to corporate environments and enhancing facility management. BEN CREAGH reports.

Australian company First Contact is turning front-of-house services into an integral part of how a facility is managed by taking principles from the hospitality industry into commercial building environments.

Since 2009 the Melbourne-based company has challenged traditional models of corporate reception and concierge services in commercial buildings by introducing five-star hotel services into premium office facilities.

First Contact now provides executive hospitality services to clients in a diverse range of industries, including banking, insurance, mining, and oil and gas, in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth.

Chief executive officer Paul Schmeja says the company's business model harnesses the secret to keeping corporate tenants happy by applying the well-established service principles of hospitality into these environments.

"It's a well-known fact in the world of luxury hotels that the most influential person for an organisation is the one who makes the first contact with the customer. So why wouldn't companies want this for their business," Schmeja, an experienced hotelier prior to founding First Contact, tells *Facility Management*.

"We become an extension of the building management team and we are the eyes

and ears of the lobby. We are the face of the building, so our employees have a really interesting relationship [with facility managers] because they become a part of the facility management team, but at the same time they are there to represent us and our values."

Schmeja says the term 'concierge' is generally understood, but often misused, so it has been First Contact's mission to educate the corporate sector about the level of professionalism and service that can be provided when a good one is engaged.

And so far its clients have seen the value in the training and development given to staff to deliver their services, which include concierge, VIP support, client floor/meeting room management and reception.

Schmeja continues: "You have this cross pollination of the values of First Contact, which are all about service and anticipation, and then marrying those with the values of the different organisations."

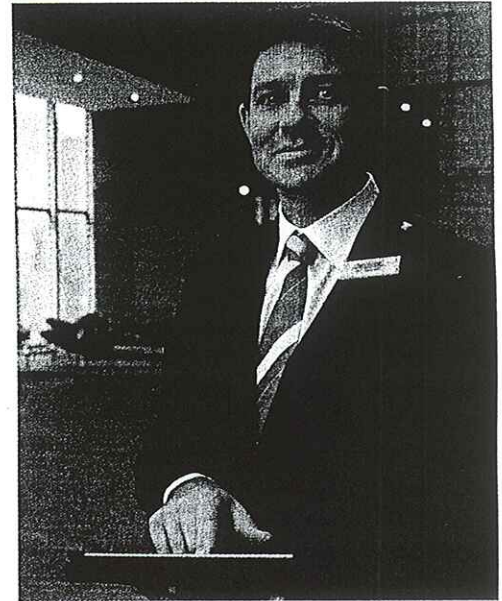
FRONT-OF-HOUSE EXPERIENCE

First Contact's growth around Australia has been backed by the belief that the most influential person for any organisation is the one who makes first contact with the customer, Schmeja reiterates.

While the front-of-house roles of security, cleaning and reception overlap, First Contact's vision is that these roles should not be interchangeable, meaning a highly-trained concierge will deliver better results. He says this ensures the front-of-house experience leaves tenants and visitors in awe of the company and, in the process, the service First Contact provides.

"It isn't [our client's] area of expertise and that's why they have brought us in. We are there to make the building an inviting, welcoming and well-presented place... and that has a flow-on effect to everyone's business," Schmeja says.

First Contact has established the cross-



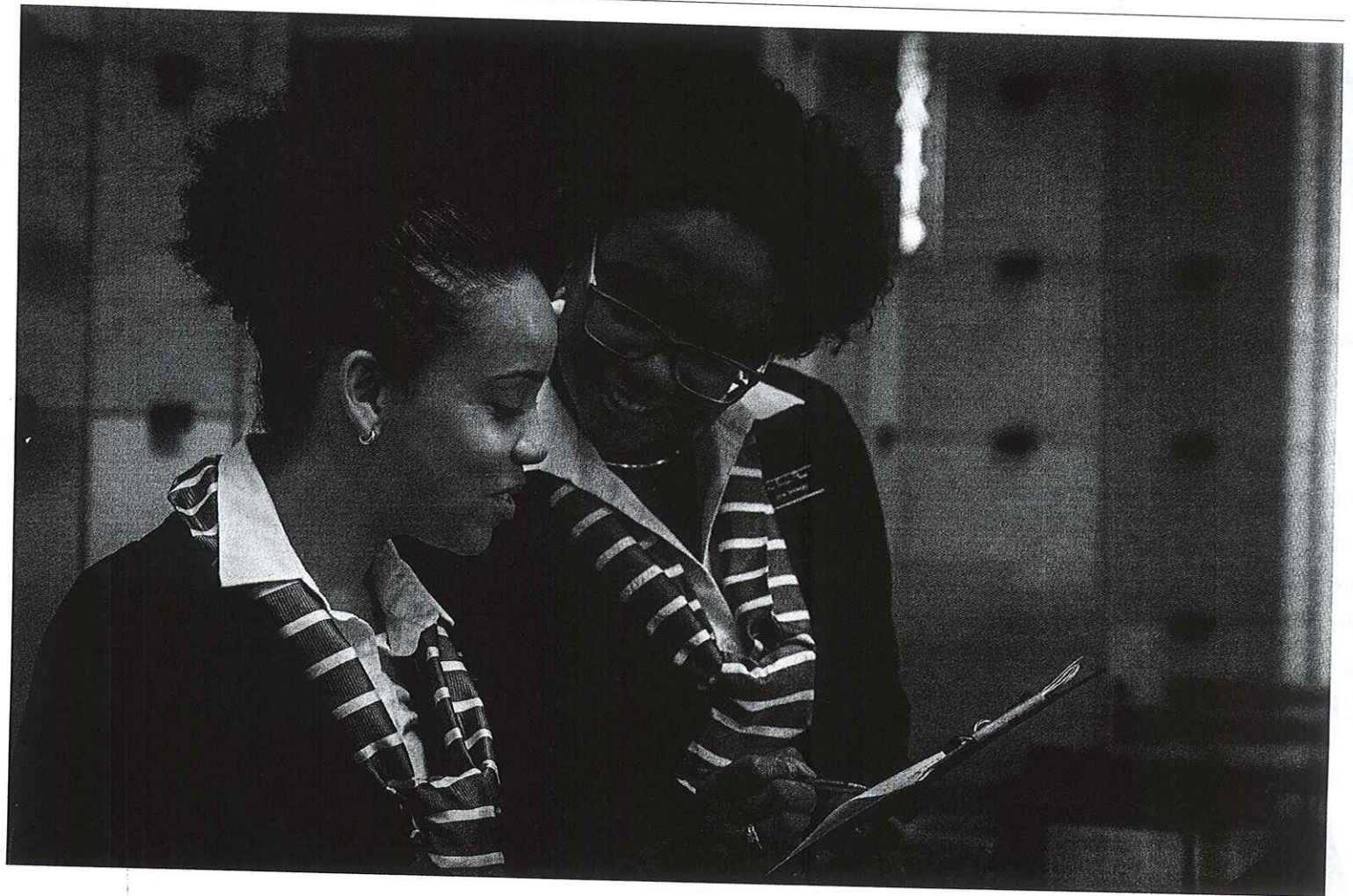
industry service concept by recruiting employees from luxury hotels across Australia and placing them front-of-house at premium commercial buildings.

According to Schmeja, the company's growth stems from its service culture, training in the luxury hotel industry and a strong network in the hospitality industry. After launching with 16 employees, the company now has more than 180 employees across Australia, with plans to expand internationally into Asia.

Using thorough recruitment processes led by a team of Australian hoteliers, First Contact only employs people with a high level of five-star hotel experience.

Schmeja says First Contact's employees must understand the key role their service has in the presentation of a company's brand and reputation, which has been noticed by many of the FM providers they represent.

"Our employees come straight from hotels and they are wanting to please [our clients]," Schmeja explains. "The good ones actually go on to work in facility management – quite a few of our staff now actually work for our clients."



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

First Contact trains its concierges to address the need to engage with building tenants by linking them to premium services and amenities in and around the workplace, such as dry cleaning, end-of-trip facilities or even leading local restaurants.

Aaron Rooney, who is a chief concierge at ANZ's global headquarters in Melbourne, says his team is basically the front face of the organisation.

"First and foremost our role is about customer service – we provide that connection for people when they come into these buildings," says Rooney.

"We provide a five-star hotel service for our clients, but it is a bit different from a hotel where people arrive internationally or from interstate. In a building in Melbourne people already know the product, so it is fun for us to go above and beyond that service.

"People still want those restaurant seats, or those theatre seats. It is about us being able to deliver it. As First Contact is a network we have a strength with that side of things."

First Contact employee Ahmed Beirachi says, from a service perspective, his role as a

concierge at a premium Sydney office building shares similarities with working in a hotel.

"The service standard is the same, but in this role my clients are busy businesspeople. I still respond to the little things like giving them a tissue when they are crying or an umbrella when it is raining. I have building policy and procedures that I must follow," says Beirachi, who worked with a major international hotel chain for 15 years.

"I give directions to visitors to make their way to their appointments, I do VIP meet and greets for executive visitors, I provide general information and help the employees with whatever they require: limos, flowers, tickets, travel or special requests."

WHAT'S NEXT?

In a competitive marketplace, high-end concierge services are now seen as a must for prospective tenants in the commercial real estate market, and could even be a deciding factor for major corporations when selecting an office location, according to Schmeja.

While First Contact has demonstrated the importance of a high quality front-of-house service for FM providers, Schmeja says

the company's clients keep asking about innovations it plans to introduce next.

He explains that First Contact always keeps an eye on technological advances and the potential they have to complement the service provided by the company.

However, Schmeja is quick to point out that First Contact does not intend to allow technology to take away from the personable nature of the company's offering.

"We came into this environment to solve a problem. The problem was lack of VIP recognition, lack of groomed receptionists and a lack of arrival experience – we have addressed all of those problems. In order to innovate that service further you have to tell me what is the next problem," Schmeja says.

"We feel that we actually got it right in the first place, but we are on a continual improvement where we are looking at technology and digital opportunities, and how visitor management systems can enhance arrival experience."

In a society where technology and apps are prolific, the established skills of customer service remain a key part of a successful business model, Schmeja concludes. ●