



Closet Encounters

Personal shoppers take the guesswork and frustration out of creating a well-coordinated wardrobe.



FOR SHARON LINHART, HIRING a personal shopper was a precious time-saver. “Like many women, I was the victim of the fashion emergency,” she says. “If I had a black-tie dinner, I would dash out when I could find a spare hour, buy something impulsive and then regret it later. My wardrobe was haphazard and not well integrated.”

Linhart, the president and managing partner of public relations firm Linhart McClain Finlon in Denver, had little time to rectify the situation. Her busy days might start at 7:30 a.m. with a committee meeting, followed by client meetings and then end with a business dinner. Linhart needed outfits that would carry her from one appointment to the next, without making her feel over- or underdressed.

The job of actually finding these outfits now falls to hired consultant Annie Brumbaugh of AB Wardrobe Works in New York. On scheduled shopping trips, Brumbaugh orchestrates the entire event, choosing garments for consideration beforehand. “When we walk into the dressing room, the wardrobe will be hanging there,” Brumbaugh says. To make the most of her clients’ time, she favors stores that sell a wide range of merchandise, such as Barneys New York, Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue, so she can readily mix and match clothing and accessories and have a fitter on hand for alterations.

For women like Linhart, whose busy lifestyles do not afford time for shopping, investing in a personal shopper can drastically cut hours spent wandering aimlessly around

TOP VIEW

FOR THE OVERWORKED with little spare time, personal shoppers can be invaluable aides. For a fee, these professional consumers—image consultants, as they prefer to be called—help their clients acquire a wardrobe. More importantly, they do all the legwork of shopping, and they know how to comprehensively build and maintain a client's image.

in stores. "As with any investment, you have an expectation of return," Linhart says. "The return on this investment is time savings and cost savings in the long run, because you're not making impulsive mistakes."

Tracy Hughes agrees. As a sales executive for the St. Regis Hotel in New York, Hughes has spent 15 years fine-tuning her wardrobe with the help of private shopper and image consultant Eve Michaels of Eve Michaels Enterprises in Beverly Hills. Today Hughes continues shopping with Michaels twice a year and would never dream of making a major purchase without her. "It's pricey, but it's worth it," Hughes says. "You spend a lot of time buying junk that sits in the back of a closet and doesn't match anything, so you end up spending more money over time."

REVEALING CHOICES

Professional shoppers—or image consultants as many prefer to be called—are quick to point out the differences between their services and those of a personal shopper in a department store. While customers often receive the latter free of charge, private shoppers' rates range from several hundred dollars an hour to several thousand dollars a day. Image consultants, however, offer far more extensive services than those of a department store shopper, who is limited to the store in which he or she works. These professionals shop at a wide range of stores and often advise their clients on every aspect of their new image, including hair, makeup, fitness, deportment and even plastic surgery. They primarily work with women, though some report a few men on their client rosters.

Individuals who hire independent shoppers are generally not required to sign a legal contract. Instead, the relationship between shopper and client is built on trust, and ideally strengthens over time as the shopper becomes more familiar with the client's wardrobe—and the client becomes more comfortable with her shopper's choices. Consultants stress the importance of developing this strong, sometimes intimate, rapport with their clients. "I keep it informal," says Ginger Burr of Total Image Consultants in Boston. "Remember, I'm seeing clients in their underwear. They have to feel comfortable and relaxed with me."

When a working relationship begins, consultants often prefer to get to know their clients before they ever go shopping with them. This initial step can take the form of a casual conversation or a more in-depth consultation at the client's home, at which time the shopper usually

conducts a thorough wardrobe assessment. The purpose is to determine the client's needs, lifestyle and personality, as well as the budget.

Michaels starts with a two-hour image consultation, including a questionnaire that covers image, health and fitness, anti-aging and sensuality. "It's never just about the clothing. It's about the entire person," she says. "During the consultation, we talk about these areas and how they pertain to image, because clothing and image are our strongest form of communication. Many people have a disconnect between their physical appearance and who they feel they are on the inside. I want to know where they are now and where they want to go."

The client should also use this opportunity to interview the shopper in order to determine whether or not the two are compatible. If they are not, the customer is under no obligation to continue the relationship. "Typically, I will know in advance if it isn't a good match," Burr says. "When that happens, it's usually because the client's expectations are unrealistic. For example, she only wears a certain style and that style isn't available, or she only wears certain colors and those colors aren't in. If I think it isn't a good fit, I'll refer that person to someone else."

After a bond has been established, the shopper and client are ready to hit the stores and boutiques. Keeping an open mind is essential when shopping with an image consultant. "I only have one rule," Burr explains. "They have to try on anything I give

them. If I think something looks spectacular, I will encourage them to buy it, but they have to make the final decision. They can put it back on the hanger, but by then it's already gone into their brain that maybe someday they could wear that shade of purple. The process gets them to see themselves differently, even if they're not ready to make that jump."

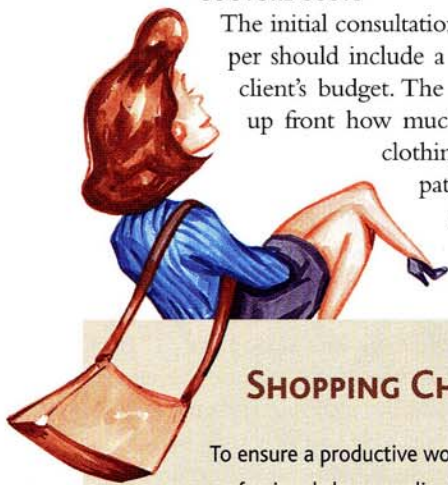
But, in most cases, by the time a woman makes the decision to hire a private shopper, she is ready and open to change. Patricia Annino, bestselling author of *Women and Money: A Practical Guide to Estate Planning*, was eager to reinvent herself when she started working with Burr about a year ago. "I was beginning to look matronly, and it freaked me out," she says. Most of Annino's closet was

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black, a shade that drained her face and made her look older than she was. Burr took her shopping and introduced her to bright colors, like turquoise, blue and green—colors she hadn't worn in years. Today Annino is more likely to favor a fuchsia ostrich jacket over a black Armani jacket. "I've received numerous compliments about the way I look," she says. "I was putting things together on an ad hoc basis. Now I have entire outfits that go together well and I feel confident in."

COUTURE COSTS

The initial consultation with a personal shopper should include a frank discussion of the client's budget. The consultant must know up front how much her client spends on clothing and what stores she patronizes. "The hardest thing for people to talk about is their budget,"



SHOPPING CHECKLIST

To ensure a productive working relationship with a professional shopper, clients should attend to the following issues before setting foot inside a store:

- ▶ **DETERMINE YOUR BUDGET.** Calculate how much you are willing to spend on your appearance. A good image consultant will respect your limits.
- ▶ **DISCUSS RATES.** Make sure you know up front how much your image consultant charges. Is it an hourly, daily or project fee? Will you be billed before or after the shopping session?
- ▶ **INTERVIEW OTHER CLIENTS.** Ask the shopper if you can speak to some of her longtime customers.
- ▶ **KEEP AN OPEN MIND.** Be willing to try new styles and colors that fall outside your comfort zone.
- ▶ **TRUST YOUR GUT.** A relationship with an image consultant is one of mutual trust. Let your intuition guide you when choosing one who understands your style and the image you want to portray. —KK

Michaels says. "Women spend, but they don't add it up. I need to know the parameters in order to create the right wardrobe. Then we have to decide what their comfort zone is: Do they want couture, high-end designer clothing or a mix? I need to know how much they want to spend and how much clothing they need."

Clients also should verify a shopper's rates before they go shopping, as these can vary widely. Some image consultants bill by the hour or by the project; others bill by the day. "If the client is nervous about the cost, she should ask how the consultant is going to bill," Brumbaugh says. "The client needs to feel like she's getting her money's worth. If the shopper charges hourly, the client should ask for an estimate so there are no surprises."

Along with a discussion of rates, clients should ask prospective consultants about their shopping strategies. Some shoppers never shop without their clients; others work on a retainer once they get to know their clients' likes and dislikes. "A retainer works well for a busy woman who wants me to bring or ship clothes to her," Michaels says. "Then I'm her eyes and ears in the stores." Many consultants have contacts that allow them to purchase merchandise to which their clients don't have access—such as the latest bag that is unavailable in shops or a pair of shoes in a limited-edition color available only at select stores.

When it comes to assembling the perfect wardrobe, image consultants often rely on a photographic memory of their clients' purchases. "Eve will remember something she bought for me 10 years ago," Hughes says. "And she'll say, 'That piece would work well with what you're buying now.'" In addition to having a gift for coordinating outfits and integrating garments with a client's existing wardrobe, private shoppers have a knack for finding the perfect item for their clients—whether it's something they've been searching for or something they would never have looked at twice. Hughes was shopping with Michaels at a consignment store when Michaels zeroed in on a green Murano glass chunky necklace. "How she found it, I don't know," Hughes says. "I would never have chosen it myself. Every time I wear that necklace I get a million compliments. It's probably one of my favorite pieces."

Defining and developing one's image—and creating the perfect wardrobe to enhance it—is an ongoing commitment. Most clients shop with a private shopper once or twice a year to update their wardrobes seasonally. Many refuse to shop alone. "A shopper has a gift," Hughes says. "I still end up making the wrong choice or the conservative choice when I shop without Eve." ▣

Kassandra Kania is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.