

Personal Shoppers – A Good Buy

If you hate shopping, then a personal shopper could be your savior, both financially and emotionally.

BY S. KAY BELL

When it comes to wardrobe purchases, are you a buyer, not a shopper? That is, do you pick up apparel only when you absolutely have to replace threadbare items, rather than revel in rack-searching at boutiques?

If so, then you might benefit from a personal shopper.

The basics of personal shopping are simple. You put together a list of what you're looking for and your shopper helps you find it. There are, however, differences in the process. Some shoppers pull the clothes for you to consider. Others let you get more involved in the selection. Either way, the goal is to get the garments you need, quickly and with less frustration.

You don't have to be a wealthy to employ a personal shopper. In fact, personal shopping really took off in the mid-1970s when more women started working outside the home. They needed to dress professionally and were earning the money to pay for such attire, but had less time to shop.

As for the cost, it can be expensive, or not. Remember that while you do pay for the service, it could save you money (and time) by allowing you to shop more efficiently.

Most personal shoppers, particularly independent shoppers versus those who work for stores, charge by the hour. A quick check of Austin area options found prices ranging from an incredibly low \$15-an-hour to a high-end \$250 per hour.

The divergent fees of personal shoppers and image consultants depend in large part on experience and training, said Julie Lara, owner of Lara Executive Image in Round Rock. Among Lara's services is personal shopping. 



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Lara is a member of the Association of Image Consultants International and she suggests the search option at that group's website AICI.org to find members in the area. A survey of your friends and colleagues also is a good starting point.

As in any hiring situation, interview a couple of prospective shoppers. Find out not only what they charge, but what that price covers. Also get a feel for their style of shopping. And definitely get references.

Independent personal shoppers can provide their services at any retail outlet. But if you have a favorite store and want to shop there exclusively, check it out. Most, including Austin locations of Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom and Macy's, offer some type of personalized shopping assistance.

DIFFERENT STYLES, SAME RESULT

Austin writer and life coach Carolyn Scarborough decided she needed shopping help when she found herself avoiding events because she didn't have the appropriate attire.

"I always grew up with the belief that it's the inside that matters, not the outside," said Scarborough, author of the book *Backyard Pearls*. "I was never that much into fashion or that great with clothes. But then I got to the point in my business that the outside wasn't matching what I had to offer. I felt like I wasn't really expressing myself."

Scarborough has used two personal shoppers. Both provided the services she wanted, but each had different approaches.

The first shopper, who conducted Scarborough's first closet audit and showed her that she actually had many "outfits that I had no idea were there," was a take-charge type.

"I hate shopping, so she pulled all the things she thought I needed, put them in the dressing room and I went in, tried them on, paid for them and left," said Scarborough.

A few years passed, fashions changed and Scarborough needed wardrobe help again. Another closet audit produced a whole slew of

clothes that the shopper graciously described as "things I can wear around the house," said Scarborough. But in restocking her closet this time, Scarborough's personal shopper is an educator.

"She's more into teaching me about fashion choices," said Scarborough. "I'm getting a whole education about how to dress myself." Those lessons are taught as the two now shop together. "I pull things off the rack and she says, 'Great, but have you considered ...'"

In both instances, Scarborough came to the same conclusion: "I think personal shoppers are phenomenal."

PREPARING FOR YOUR SHOPPER

OK, you know what you want from your personal shopper. What does a professional want from you?

"Set up a clothing budget beforehand so that we have a framework," said Lara. "You may spend less or more, but you need a starting point."

Let your shopper know what specific pieces you're looking for. Try to stay focused on those goals. "If you want certain garments, let's try to find those before we look at something else that might have caught your eye," said Lara.

Be on time. "If you're 15 minutes late, that's shopping time you don't get," said Lara.

The Round Rock consultant also asks her clients to refrain from taking phone calls or answering e-mails. She makes exceptions for family emergency alerts, but routine communications prevent you from getting the full benefit of the time for which you're paying.

Finally, be flexible. It's natural for people to want to stay in their clothing comfort zone, said Lara, but in most cases people hire a personal shopper to help them push the envelope.

"I might bring you something and you'd say, 'Oh, I'd never wear that,' but just try it on," said Lara. "You might have the preconception that you're not thin enough or not the right age, but try to get over that. No one is going to see you in the dressing room."

Resource Guide

Sandra Antoun

KITSCH TRADING CO.
kitschtradingco.com

Antoun offers all women, no matter her style, a dash of her exquisite taste for timeless, sustainable ensembles tailored to each individual she works with. After spending time in her client's closets, Antoun prides herself on creating 80 outfits out of 50, bringing a fresh, chic eye to incorporating designer and vintage apparel into everyday life.

Miranda Darr

FASHION MD
fashionmd.com

"It's not just about your clothes," says fashion consultant Miranda Darr, founder of Fashion MD. Darr looks at eyewear, accessories, shoes and more – including assisting with makeup artist consultations and selecting a great tailor. After all, first impressions happen only once. "I identify what will most improve your look through the art of dressing well," says Darr. Bottom line? "My goal is for my clients to love everything they have in their closet."

Julie Lara

LARA EXECUTIVE
IMAGE
julielara.com

Association of Image Consultants International

AICI.org

S. Kay Bell's book, The Truth About Paying Fewer Taxes, offers readers 52 truths about how they can find tax savings in our complex tax code.