

# Secrets of the Black-Belt Shoppers

*As practiced by the masters, getting the best price is an art well worth emulating.*

*A financial planner. An entrepreneur. A consultant. And a researcher. They have one sharply honed skill in common. If ceremonial honors were to be bestowed for inspired shopping, the four martial artists of the marketplace presented here would earn the highest rank.*

## **SUSAN DRESNER** **A pro takes the torture out of the racks.**

Susan Dresner, 40, darts through the busy communal dressing room of a New York City discount store to an unoccupied corner, where she deposits her coat, briefcase and other paraphernalia. She then steams onto the sales floor, bypassing other customers who, in varying states of undress, are soliciting opinions on clothes they're trying on. Says Dresner: "If they ask my advice, I tell them I charge \$50 an hour."

As the founder of Successful Ways & Means, a five-year-old Manhattan-based business, she helps individual clients—largely executive women—determine their style of dress and then helps g them shop for clothes to establish it.

Dresner teaches her clients to save not only money but time. Says she: "I tell my customers if they aren't buying 75% of what they take into the dressing room,

they aren't screening well enough."

Dresner has carefully honed a rack routine designed to separate promising pieces from clothing catastrophes long before she slips them on. Her pointers:

- ▶ First consider the fabric and workmanship—what goes into a garment is the true tip-off to its quality.
- ▶ Then examine the label, not for the de-signer name but the country of origin.

- ▶ Look at the price tag last, and measure it in cost per wearing.

According to Dresner, Italy and then France produce the finest men's and women's clothes. Recently the West Germans and Scandinavians have been turning out well-made garments at reasonable prices. Dresner believes that the sleeper among the fashion crowd is Ireland. Says she: "Today Ireland is doing more than the preppy sweaters and tar-tan skirts that were always a tremendous value."

Just as Dresner steers her female customers away from tailored dress-for-success suits, she warns shoppers away from department stores and discount chains with central buying offices. For more distinctive clothes for less money, she patronizes smaller off-price shops where the owner scouts manufacturers for the best deals on unique merchandise.

Timing is important. Dresner shops these



price cousins—August for fall-winter clothes and March for spring-summer apparel. "Buy what you like immediately; pick up bargains later. Don't wait till the end of the season for what nobody else wants," says Dresner. "By and large, left-overs are losers."

Dresner violates her own department store dictum only when it comes to designer ready-to-wear. These retailers often carry the most prestigious names in fashion to build their own image rather than their bottom line. At the end of a season, when they must move out the old line, prices often dip below cost.

For couture quality at discount prices, Dresner suggests resale shops. Unlike thrift stores, these profit-making businesses are more likely to select the finest offerings to recycle. Dresner's rule of resale: shoot for the big-ticket items—like formal wear that originally cost thousands of dollars.

*-Carrie Tuhy*