



Image

PERSONAL SHOPPERS JOIN THE SUPPORT NETWORK

Along with more money, a good job brings less time to spend it. Enter the image consultant, the professional woman's answer to dressing well on a tight schedule.
—by *Elaine Louie*

Finding the time to shop for clothes is never easy—even when you know what you want to buy. But if you suspect you don't know what looks well on you, if you've worn the same five suits for the last four years and you have a full closet but "nothing to wear," you probably could use help. A growing number of women are getting that help by delegating the clothes-shopping chore to a consultant.

A fashion or image consultant provides one-stop shopping at its most time efficient. The consultant meets with a client first to discuss her existing wardrobe, her job, her needs and her budget. She also gives advice about style, cut, colors and the sort of accessories - and even haircuts and make-up—that are most flattering. After the initial meeting, she pulls clothes from one or several sources, takes the client to the clothes and makes the whole experience of buying what's needed for work, weekends and black-tie events as pleasant and painless as possible.

As women gain money and lose time in their move up the ladder, the fashion-consultant business is booming. There are the independents, who work for themselves or for small, image-consulting companies, the department-store consulting services and the specialized stores set up to cater to executive women.

There also were less formal setups. Susan Dresner, a New York consultant, says that there always were women who had husbands who knew someone in the garment district. "One woman whose husband worked on Seventh Avenue would offer to go to a manufacturer, choose a few things for a friend and sell them to her at the wholesale price plus a small percentage".

SHOULD YOU CHOOSE AN INDEPENDENT?

Susan Dresner, whose company is called Successful Ways & Means, charges a yearly membership fee of \$255 and provides a personal profile of the client plus body analysis, color and wardrobe analysis, yearly budget and referrals for shopping services during the year should the client suddenly need a special pair of shoes or an evening dress. She does not charge for research time but charges \$50 an hour to take the client shopping. Unlike Cho, who basically shops on New York's pricey Upper East Side, Dresner looks for clothes all over the city, including boutiques, resale stores and discount stores.

She also takes clients directly to manufacturers of suits and separates as well as to a few designers of belts, scarves and jewelry. Here, she charges a markup between wholesale and retail. "I never go to a department store," she says, "because clients don't need me to buy a Ralph Lauren."

Comparing Smoller, Dresner and Cho brings up several points to consider before you hire an independent consultant. You will be charged for a consulting session and for the additional time the expert spends going shopping with you. She may or may not bill you for the time she spends re-searching stores before you shop with her. You also should ask about the sources from which she draws her clothes-consultants who have arrangements to acquire things directly from manufacturers, or who use discount shops rather than high-priced specialty stores, are likely to cost you less than those who simply charge you a mark-up on top of the item's retail price.

