



BY NEDRA RHONE

dress to impress

Is hiring a personal shopper a waste of money or a priceless career investment?

ON A TUESDAY AFTERNOON AT Saks Fifth Avenue, Robanne Schulman and Laura Estrada gleefully weave through the aisles discussing outfits and weekend plans. They appear to be friends on a lunchtime shopping break from work, except that Schulman, a personal shopper, is working.

"You could wear this with nice slacks or even jeans," she says, holding up a cropped leather jacket by Vince in the packed dressing room where Estrada tries one outfit after another. Schulman has assembled a mix of outfits that will carry Estrada well into the holiday season.

When she slips into Capri pants and a gray blouse by Theory, Estrada shimmies with delight, but a turquoise shirt earns less enthusiasm.

"Do I look pregnant?" Estrada asks.

"You don't look prego," Schulman says, "but I know you, and you won't wear it."

Schulman's job is to make the work of shopping easier for her clients in the manner of a tactful best friend with impeccable taste. But the service comes at a cost, and increasing-

ly, busy professional women are willing to pay for a shopper's expertise in exchange for a worry-free wardrobe and extra time to spend on family and career.

"Time is number one with me," says Estrada, a mother of two who juggles responsibilities in a family-owned business with building her own business as an executive regional vice president and independent consultant for Arbonne International. Working with Schulman has made her balancing act a bit easier. "Children throw a wrench in the shopping," she says.

Personal shoppers do everything from buying clothing and gifts to running errands. Some see their business double during the holidays, when stressed-out clients seek an escape from crowded stores. Still, hiring a personal shopper may not be the first thing that comes to mind for a woman hoping to balance life and work.

"Before I worked with an image consultant, I probably thought the same way as other people: 'What are you paying for?'" says Dana Jewell, an attorney for General Mills Inc. in Minneapolis. "It's

like anything else. Why try to be a specialist in every single thing when you can tap into the creativity of others?"

Jewell quickly reaped the benefits of the service. "I feel like I'm portraying the image I want to portray, and that makes me feel more powerful and assertive," she says. Now, in addition to getting dressed faster, Jewell says she is more confident and communicates better at work - all for about \$90 per hour in fees and an initial \$2,000 budget.

With professionals viewing shopping as simply another task to outsource, the recent personal shopping boom is not surprising. According to the Association of Image Consultants International, 59 percent of its U.S. members list personal shopping as a specialty. National membership has increased 72 percent in the last two years.

"[Celebrity] confessions and makeover reality shows have really brought the consciousness to dinner tables across America," says Colleen Abrie, a personal stylist and image consultant in the San Francisco Bay area.

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If it all sounds a little too Jackie Kennedy, don't be fooled. There is a personal shopper to cater to each taste and budget. But be forewarned: During the holidays there may be additional charges. Samantha von Sperling, a New York-based image consultant who shops for confidential high-profile clients, tacks a premium onto her base fee of \$300 per hour if clients ask for holiday help at the last minute. She usually receives holiday gift lists by September. "Holidays are a stampede," von Sperling says.

The onset of the holiday season is what initially drove Kelly Loeffler to seek a personal shopper. "Seasons would change and I would be caught at the beginning of winter without appropriate clothes to travel and do business," says Loeffler, who works a 70- to 80-hour week as vice president of corporate communications for a financial services firm. With one to two business trips per week, she needed someone to help her organize a travel-worthy wardrobe. A department store employee put her in touch with Schulman, who charges \$500 for an

initial closet consultation. These days their meetings consist of Schulman's zipping a car full of clothes to Loeffler's home for fittings. This year, Loeffler plans to enlist Schulman's help with gifts too, taking advantage of the unique finds that Schulman scoops up on buying trips to New York. The time saved "has helped me focus on things that I think are important," Loeffler says, "like participating on a charitable board or spending time with friends or family."

When trusting someone to build your wardrobe or buy gifts, the most important thing, women say, is to find a shopper who understands your personality and your life.

Timberly Whitfield, the New York-based host of the Hallmark Channel's *New Morning*, knows the downside of not having the right shopper. She liked one shopper, but the woman's predilection for Target and TJ Maxx didn't fit Whitfield's image. Whitfield and yet another shopper just didn't click personally. Then Laura Solin showed up with a stylish mix of clothing from Anthropologic, Theory and Nanette Lepore. Now, before speaking engagements, weddings or parties, they hit

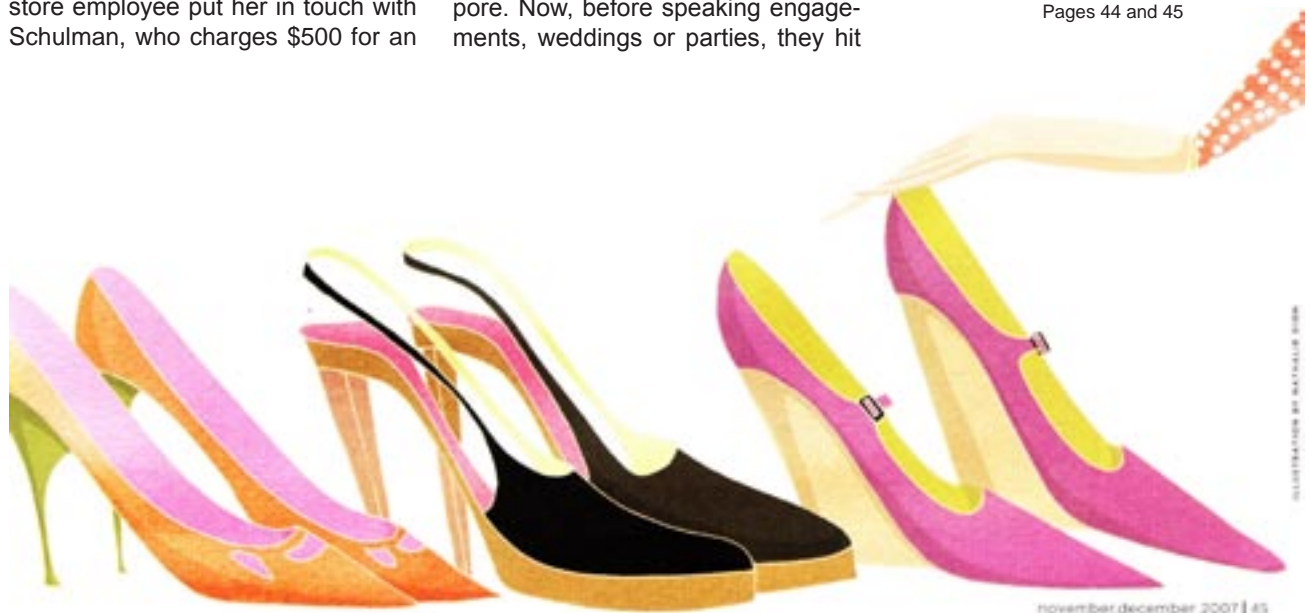
the stores and in 15 minutes or less, Solin scans the racks and loads the dressing room. "What could take me days on my own, she does in a matter of hours," says Whitfield. In return, Whitfield spends

her spare time doing activities her 5-year-old daughter wants to do instead of dragging her on shopping excursions.

Back at Saks, one hour and several new outfits later, Schulman has filled in the gaps in Estrada's wardrobe. Before racing off to a meeting, Estrada remembers that she also needs a dress and shoes for a weekend event. Quick as a blink, Schulman summons a sales associate, who returns with the perfect Prada sandals. Schulman then assures Estrada she will keep hunting for a dress. With a wave goodbye and a promise to meet up later, Estrada exits the store.

And Schulman goes back to work.

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