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All shopped out? Time to call a professional

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It's ranked as North Americans' favorite leisure activity, but for many, shopping is a chore. There are those who downright despise it, especially during the holiday season, but for an increasing number of people, it's simply a matter of not having enough hours in the day.

Enter the personal shopper -- a savior of sorts for the time-pressed individual or those with an overwhelming to-do list.

"We save them the time to go to the mall, park and shop," says Starr, who goes by one name in her personal and professional life, and owner and CEO of [Your Personal Shopper](#), a Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based personal shopping service.

Something for everyone

These days, personal shopping is no longer the domain of the elite. Sure, there are celebrities and high-end shoppers looking for convenience and a little

pampering, but clients also include busy families and even seniors.

"More and more these days, the requests are coming from people who have many gifts to purchase," says Starr, who charges 10 percent of the total order, at a minimum of \$25 per order.

Needless to say, during the holiday season the focus is on buying gifts. Employ a personal shopper and the harried task is as simple as coming up with a wish list of items or simply a list of people for whom you need to buy.

For instance, [Plaid Monkey](#), a corporate and personal shopping service based in Atlanta, will shop for a client's gifts, take pictures of potential buys and present the photos in a "look book" for the client to peruse. The company also takes care of shipping, "so the client doesn't have to lift a finger," says Robanne Schulman, professional shopper and CEO of Plaid Monkey.

Personal shoppers do more than shop. Often people turn to them for ideas or advice. For instance, personal shoppers can help stumped grandparents buy the grandkids the latest and greatest gadgets, can help a husband find his wife that perfect gift or can help you come up with a unique experience for the person who has everything.



These professionals know the tricks of the trade, such as where and when to buy certain products. They may also know where to look for offbeat gifts. "I take the time to find different items," says Schulman. If the recipient in mind enjoys wine, she might search for a vintage decanter, she says. It's something unusual that a client may not have the time to shop for in stores.

In addition, some personal shoppers can run miscellaneous errands for you. Besides gift-shopping for clients, the professionals at Sensible Shoppers, a personal shopping service with branches in Los Angeles and Manhattan, can pick up and deliver holiday meals, take dogs to the groomer or mail stacks of holiday cards for their customers, among other chores. "It's a lot of service under one umbrella," says owner Vanessa Wauchope, whose shoppers charge \$25 an hour.

What's in-store?

Another option is a professional shopper employed by a mall, department store or boutique; often the service is free as the shopper is paid via commission or salary.

[Macy's](#), [Bloomingdale's](#), [Neiman Marcus](#) and [Nordstrom](#) all staff personal shoppers. (Not all locations employ personal shoppers, so call or check the store's Web site.)

But what about your holiday wardrobe? Department store personal shoppers can help there, too. At Bloomingdale's, for example, personal shoppers will outline the customer's preferences over the phone and scour the store for specific pieces. Customers simply come to the store and meet with the shopper privately to review the clothing options. Generally, requests from new clients can take up to two hours to fulfill, says Marian Goodman, vice president of shopping services for Bloomingdale's.

Style and shop

When it comes to buying clothes, the jobs of personal shopper and stylist go hand in hand. Dana Lynch is an image consultant and personal shopper based in Denver. People who hire her image management firm, Elements of Image, for personal shopping expertise can expect more than just fashion advice.

"I know what's good and what's not good quality," says Lynch, who brings 15 years of experience in retail sales and management to the table and a bachelor's degree in textile, clothing and fashion merchandising. "People are not buying mistakes when they're shopping with me. They're not buying a \$500 suit that's going to sit in their closet."

Sometimes people turn to stylists or shoppers because they have a big event coming up for which they need that perfect outfit. In most cases, however, they want to be fashionable, but have little time to research the latest trends and trawl the shops for must-have items. Lynch pre-shops the stores after an in-person overview of her client's tastes and needs, and puts all potential buys on hold. Then she and her client come in and review the clothes together.

Costs vary widely. Lynch charges \$75 an hour, while Schulman generally commands \$150 an hour, plus a percentage of the total amount of the purchases, if it's a time-consuming assignment. Her pricing varies per customer.

The service is free with some retailers, while others in private practice charge a percentage (usually 10 percent) of the total purchase, an hourly rate or a previously agreed-upon flat fee (be sure to ask about expenses, such as parking or transportation and fees for shipping and delivery).

The payback for the big bucks?

"The greatest gift that personal shoppers can give their clients is the gift of time," says Goodman.

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