

The Perfect Fit

Fashion-savvy personal shoppers save clients time and money.

Diane Wilbur shops for a living. She shops for spike-heeled Jimmy Choo boots for chic socialites. She hunts down first-of-the-season Chanel suits and smart travel wardrobes for time-strapped businesswomen whose energies are better spent climbing corporate ladders than prowling retail racks. She finds the perfect, special-occasion Vera Wang or Tadashi gown for the newlywed or soccer mom bent on looking “just so” for a night on the town with a prominent hubby. She puts together knock ‘em dead interview ensembles complete with shoes, handbag, jewelry and just the right fragrance for the recent grad or upwardly mobile executive looking for a career break.

When year-end holidays roll around or a bridal party needs outfitting, the size 4 shopping wunderkind might find herself in a dozen different Saks Fifth Avenue departments to fulfill a shopping challenge at the luxury institution where she’s been meeting fashion, gift-giving and home decor needs for the past 3 years. For clients ranging from sale-only buyers to those with sky’s-the-limit budgets, she may pull merchandise from a Saks in New York or L.A. At South Coast Plaza, she might walk the floor with a patron to establish lifestyle needs and fashion desires. Or, she’ll set up 1 of 6 dressing rooms in the third floor area set aside for personal shopping services. Her client can sip champagne or Perrier and nosh on strawberries in between trying on finery pulled by a professional who acknowledges that she “lives and breathes fashion.”

For such personal services, the client pays nothing beyond the cost of the merchandise. And while there’s no minimum purchase required or obligation to



PHOTO BY DAVID KAWASHIMA

Saks Fifth Avenue personal shopper Diane Wilbur

buy, customers rarely leave without purchasing something, Wilbur confesses. Regardless of budget or purchases, it’s a value-added service at Saks, now offered in a more relaxed, lounge environment than what was formerly available at the elite, secluded Saks Fifth Avenue Club.

Wilbur is one of numerous personal shoppers at upscale Orange County retailers – a style guru with a keen understanding of fit, color and product ranging from designer duds to less-pricey “bridge” lines. For some 30 to 35 hours each week, she assists customers with a level of individual attention above and beyond what a retail associate would offer.

Like many of her ilk, Wilbur has no formal training in fashion. She can, however, look back on a career in retail that began at St. John. And she can take pride in a skill set that includes patience, tact, communication abilities and a gift for building client relationships. Stamina also is essential,

as Wilbur notes she can clock over 25 calorie-burning miles a day on the floor – aerobic activity that allows her to eat almost anything and still maintain her svelte silhouette.

“It’s all about relationships,” says the mom of 2 grown daughters, who loves shopping for others, yet relies on her husband and kids to pick out her wardrobe. To build those essential bonds, personal shoppers must be part shrink and part fashion coach, with a boundless love of clothes and deep empathy for their clients’ desires to look their best. When they accomplish that, they accomplish their own goal, as well as their customer’s – a happy buyer who keeps coming back season after season and special occasion after special occasion.

At Bloomingdale’s in Fashion Island, Debra Russell has been performing similar services since 1996 for clients who include local housewives, high-powered corporate players and newly divorced men setting

up house. A Corona del Mar resident for more than 30 years, Russell notes that she knows most of the people who walk into “Bloomies” and can assist them with every shopping need, from fashion advice to selecting perfect patterns and linens for the home.

She can save you time. She may save you money. She’ll shop the full store, from clothing to home and beyond. She’ll keep track of important dates in your life and give you a reminder call as birthdays, anniversaries and other significant occasions approach.

“My clients are my friends,” Russell professes. “I know what they like. I know what they need. I would never sell them some-

thing for a particular occasion that someone else in their social circle owns. I keep a file on everyone who walks through the door.”

Like Wilbur, Russell has no degrees in fashion but did earn a B.A. in business from UC Santa Barbara years ago. To prepare for each season, she takes her place on Bloomingdale’s executive team on junkets to New York. She visits showrooms and sits on designer runways. She meets buyers and chats with vendor reps.

Having worked her way up from part-time sales associate, Russell credits her love of fashion and gift for relating with people for success in her present role. Attesting to her skills are such satisfied clients as Emerald Bay resident Prissy Eeds

– a self-described, “obsessive shopper” and former interior designer who can’t say enough about the wonders Russell performs.

“Debra is adorable,” Eeds gushes. “She’s nice, she’s friendly, she wants me to be happy. She brings me things in the store. She comes to my house with things to try on and takes other things back. If I see a Donna Karan suit I love in a magazine, I’ll call Debra and she’ll call New York to see if they have that suit.”

Is Russell in it for sales that will boost her salary with a commission? Hardly, Eeds insists. “Debra’s honest about what looks good and what doesn’t. She tells me when I’m off-base.”

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SHOPPING WITHOUT DROPPING

Numerous Orange County retailers offer personal shopping services. Here are a few:

RETAILER	WHO TO CALL	PHONE	SERVICES OFFERED
Bloomingdale's	Debra Russell	(949) 729-6624	In-store personal shopping service for clothing, home and gifts; will go to home by special arrangement.
Bvlgari	Susan Franklin	(714) 751-7833	Will go to home and office by appointment. Sends valet parking passes to best clients. Serves champagne and other refreshments.
Ermenegildo Zegna	Audrey McKenzie	(714) 444-1534	After-hour shopping by appointment. First purchase of suit they will dry clean. Home and office clothing selection. Free delivery and shipping in the U.S. Refreshments served.
Giorgio Armani	Hunter Tate	(714) 546-9377	In-home or at-office trunk shows with a private tailor. Free delivery. Reserves limited edition runway pieces for special clients. Early and after-hour shopping. Will cater at no cost for private parties.
Hermès	Alison Cottrell	(714) 437-1725	Complimentary valet parking. Refreshments. Home and office delivery by appointment. Open early and late for special clients. Birthday parties for children and adults.
Louis Vuitton	Bill Peters	(714) 662-6907	Will take clothing to customers' homes to try on. Private shopping before or after hours by appointment. Will arrange private dressing rooms. Free local delivery, gift-wrapping and monogramming.
Macy's	Agatha Dura	(714) 556-6248	In-store personal shopping for clothing, home and gifts.
Marina Rinaldi	Aethra Gervase	(714) 918-7600	Each sales consultant is a personal shopper for women sizes 10-22. Will set up appts. Or clients can call to explain what they need and will send out pieces on approval when they set up accounting plan.
Nordstrom	Personal Touch	(714) 549-8300 Ext. 390	Creates personal boutiques in dressing room for clothing, home and gifts.
Saks Fifth Avenue	Diane or Sasha	(714) 540-3233	In-store personal shopping for clothing, home and gifts. Wine, sparkling water and cookies available.
Salvatore Ferragamo	Donna Collett	(714) 979-7654	Will deliver to the home by appointment. In-store parties for special customers. Serve refreshments. Free gift-wrapping and delivery.
Sergio Rossi	Heather Kralik	(714) 751-7311	Private shopping before or after hours by appointment. Will deliver to home or office. Will arrange a shoe party for a group of women. Will drop off several pairs of shoes to try on and return to the home or office to pick them up. Their motto is, “We go to them!”

RETAIL

While the Eeds says she hardly ever pays full price, she may have more discretionary funds at her disposal than many clients of Agatha Dura, a personal shopper at Macy's by Appointment. Dura started as a sales associate 14 years ago. She will celebrate her first anniversary as a personal shopper in August and says, "I'd never go back on the floor."

While Macy's service targets customers from their mid-20s to mid-60s, the South Coast Plaza outlet has numerous departments, like the hip Impulse section, that cater to a younger crowd. "My clients' budgets are all over the map," acknowledges Dura. Aided by her young assistant, Jesse Andrews, a graduate of the Fashion Institute of L.A., she provides fashion counseling for a customer base of some 100 clients of all ages. Among them are ordinary Joes and Janes, as well as celebrities the likes of Vicki Lawrence, and Roseanne Barr.

Of all the retailers offering personal shopping services, Nordstrom is perhaps best known for its Personal Touch program, offered at Brea Mall, Los Cerritos Center, Main Place, South Coast Plaza and The Shops at Mission Viejo. While appointments are recommended, walk-in customers are sometimes obliged. For those who want to get the most bang for their bucks, appointments are booked weeks in advance for shopping assistance during such important shopping events as the Fall Preview Sale and the Women's and Children's Half-Yearly Sale.

"We like to start with a short telephone interview, to assess a customer's needs, lifestyle and personal style," explains Linda Plunkett, Orange County

regional manager and a wardrobe consultant whose clients include many she started working with 13 years ago when she joined Nordstrom's sales staff.

"Whether the customer's a busy mom who wants to look her best or a man launching a new career or a new image, we help each client get optimal value for their money by selecting things with great style, fit and color."

Hand-picked from a pool of standout salespeople who provide excellent customer service, Nordstrom's wardrobe consultants are trained in fit, color, seasonal trends, product lines and other fashion topics. Education is ongoing, through vendors and others knowledgeable about style, fit and product.

The ultimate goal? "We listen to customers and help them find what they need and want," Plunkett concludes. "We all think we have figure problems, but clothes can fix that, especially if they fit and are the right color."

To work such magic, wardrobe consultants become "employees of the customer," according to the self-professed, trendy mom of 2 grown children. On one occasion, a consultant even served as a matchmaker.

"We had 2 customers working with the same personal shopper at South Coast Plaza. Now they're planning a wedding, and that consultant will be there to celebrate."

Apparently, clothes not only make the man; sometimes, they make him a groom. **OCM**

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