

HELPING HANDS

Too busy to shop or organise your life? Well, why not pay a professional to take on these tiresome tasks for you?

We talk to three helpers to the wealthy and their busy clients.

STORY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

The Stylist SUZY CRITTENDEN

Personal wardrobe consultant, Suzy Crittenden Fashion Solutions

As a former catwalk model, Crittenden knows how to dress. Corporate wives, businesswomen, socialites and politicians' wives all take advantage of this woman's style and knack for shopping. Just hand over the credit card and let Crittenden do the walking.

"I had a friend who was dining with Prince Charles and didn't know what to wear, so I found her a fabulous frock that wouldn't outshine the hostess at Highgrove, but would match up with the other 27 dinner guests. That's how I got started. I got a lot of clients through that.

"For most of my clients, budget is no problem, but I am still surprised how lacking in confidence they sometimes are with dressing themselves. High-flying women don't have time to keep up with fashion, but they know it's important to look up-to-date. That's where I come in.

"We'll assess their wardrobe in the first meeting. I'll clean out their wardrobes and change buttons, remove shoulder pads, throw out clothes. Then we'll talk about what kind of lifestyle they have.

"So many women cover up or are too stark; you can still be strong as well as sexy and feminine. I'll soften their hair, change the cut of their jacket. It's often as simple as one brilliant talking-point piece.

"You do build up a relationship; these women are letting you into their private worlds, and they're honest about 'their bits'. Some will say, 'I hate my arms showing', others will say 'no clingy clothes'. I take it all on board and help them develop a style.

"After the initial shop they may only need to call me to say 'I have a function and nothing to wear' and I'll do all the work for them. I know their colour, their style and what's in their wardrobe because I bought it. Most of my clients see me each season for an update of that season's fashion.

"Some clients tell their friends they have a personal stylist, some prefer to let others believe they do it all themselves. Some women see it as indulgent, but really it's about investing properly for the right outfit. I wouldn't design my home because that's not my forte; I'd pay an interior designer to do it. Why wouldn't you do the same with your own look?"

The Client JEANNETTE KENDALL

A divisional brand manager for sleep-wear and underwear maker Holeproof, as well as a wife and mother of two, Jeannette Kendall also sits on the board of the Melbourne Festival of the Arts and oversees Women Chiefs of Enterprise.

"I was constantly moaning that I didn't have time to shop. I got to a stage where everything in my wardrobe looked the same and I'd be going to dinner in what I'd wear to work.

"I use Suzy for everything; I call her each season, and if I have a crisis she gets a call as well. Last year it was the week before Melbourne Cup and I realised I had left it too late for an outfit for derby; one call and she got the whole thing sorted.

"If I'm going on a conference, I'll email her the conference programme and she'll put outfits together for me for each event. She re-hung everything in my wardrobe into outfits rather than suits, shirts, skirts. All I have to do is pull out one outfit at a time and I know what's going to be worn with what.

"I certainly don't see a personal stylist as a luxury; I see it as a necessity. We all make mistakes when we buy clothes and they can be very costly mistakes, but I don't make them any more."



The Organiser KATE GOSMI

Personal assistant, The 25th Hour

Does your pooch need aerobicising? Run out of that favourite lipstick you bought in Paris? Need a gift for your sister-in-law and only Gucci will do, or perhaps the Bentley's on the blink and you need a limo quick sticks? You need a personal assistant. Enter Kate Gosmi.

"If it's legal we do it. One woman had ski boots she'd bought in Austria in 1998 and the company had closed. She wanted new base plates for the boots and we had to track them down somewhere around the world before her ski trip that weekend. We did it.

"We do last-minute catering for dinner parties, people who are stuck in airports who ring and say, 'Go set the table, and find something to eat, I've got guests in half an hour', that sort of thing. We manage tradespeople. It's hard to manage home renovations when you're working. We've sourced rare wine for a collector. But the most helpful things we offer are the normal things that take up people's time.

"We pick up dry-cleaning, buy presents for birthdays, book travel and research holidays—anything that is on people's to-do lists. The types of women who use me are executives and professionals and small-business owners. Over 70 per cent are executive women, their partners are working too or they're on their own or are single professional mothers. Our clients are high income earners, definitely, but it's really about placing a value on time.

"Clients tend to keep us on a monthly contract where we offer our services 24/7 and you pay for the hours you use us. Some people don't get what we do at all; it's not the type of service you can advertise. I've had people ringing thinking I was a domestic help agency and wanting to know when I could clean their house!"

The Client ERICA KING

At 38, Erica King manages 15 staff and turns over \$5 million annually. Rarely at home, King travels twice a month for five days at a time.

"I wonder how I ever survived without Kate. She organises my entire life, from getting my groceries to organising my food, booking my social life, arranging gifts, repairing the car, organising my exercise. I lost a diamond in a ring; she fixed it. I need a gift for a family member; she's bought it. I run marathons for a hobby, and not only did Kate find an appropriate nutritionist for me, but she picked up the fresh meals each day and delivered them to my office and home to ensure I eat the right food at the right time. I wanted to join a rowing club, so she sourced the clubs, then bought the gear for me.

"I used to have dry-cleaning that I would leave for days, an empty fridge, half-completed renovations. I now have a weekend, which I never had before, an extra 15 hours a week of my own time. My friends think it's hilarious. People are fascinated; they do envy it, but I am a lot calmer and less stressed because I eat better, my house is always clean, I'm not rushed, I'm more focused on work. It's because I utilise everything she has to offer; it's costly but you don't have to live up to a superwoman myth if you can get someone else to do it for you!"

The Shopper CAROLYN GLOVER

Grocery shopper, Home Gourmet

Carolyn Glover's tastebuds are used to the best. Fifteen years with acclaimed Sydney restaurateurs Neil Perry and Stefan Manfredi would do that to you. On her days off she used to cook at home, utilising restaurant suppliers for fresh produce, and—voilà!—her Home Gourmet business was born. So there's no need to trawl aisle six at Woolies at midnight, Glover will do it for you. Only it's not Woolies she'll be trawling—it's Australia's best independent gourmet food providers.

"Our clients love good food and they tend to cater for more than just themselves—they are busy mothers trying to feed their children, or business executives entertaining clients at home. Anyone who wants to eliminate time and access produce they wouldn't normally be able to get.

"I am up at 5am and out to Flemington Markets. I'll visit Paesanella specialty cheese shop daily for Sydney's freshest ricotta cheese and pick it up while it's still warm. I visit Italian providores, prime butchers, specialised bakeries. We have over 650 products on our shopping list and they're all the best.

"We unpack the order for our clients, put it away in their kitchens and advise them on how to use each product. Most clients give us keys to their house, so they can come home to find fully stocked cupboards each week. If they're having a dinner party, we'll choose a menu, purchase the ingredients and explain the cooking procedure.

"It's perfect for those with holiday homes, farms and boats. A quick call before they go and we deliver boxes of food for their holiday. We've even had our produce on planes to the Whitsundays for private yacht charters.

"One client rings me each week and we go through her diary. 'I have three dinner parties on for my husband's clients, and I'm home on the weekend for lunch, and I need three meals for the family. Oh, and I don't fancy chicken this week, what shall I get?' They leave it up to us and no-one ever complains. Would you, with a kitchen full of food?"

The Client KIRSTY RANKIN

Kirsty Rankin works close to 80 hours a week as a managing director of a large marketing firm. She has two children and used to be found at the local 7-Eleven picking up processed white bread and Vegemite on her way home each night.

"Food shopping takes forward planning and I didn't have time. I would panic every time I had to entertain or when someone dropped in unannounced. If I had a dinner party, my guests would arrive and I'd still be unpacking the chops. I wanted to spend my time in other ways than behind a shopping trolley.

"When I first used my own grocery shopper I felt exulted; guilt didn't even come into the equation. I thought, 'Wow! Why did I wait so long?' My friends always ask where I got the food from. I'd love to tell them, but I have to confess my personal shopper does it for me." ■