

SHOPPING

Taking it personally

Stéphanie Duval

Certainly, it must be something that has flown over from the United States, where you can contract out virtually any task: walking your dog, picking up your groceries, parking your car or... shopping for a new wardrobe. Now, small companies are popping up all over Flanders, willing to take over the agonising chore of scrutinising this season's trends and picking out only those items that are perfectly right for you.

The question remains whether this service, while immensely popular abroad, will appeal to the Flemish. Now especially, budgets are tight, and this extra service might seem more than a little indulgent. And indeed, it proved rather difficult to find people who have enlisted the services of a personal shopper, just to write this article.

The personal stylist phenomenon is definitely not as common as, say, going to a salon for a beauty make-over. While the latter is something most women will contemplate at one time or another, having someone go through your closet, weed out the bad and help you find the good, is not as easy – both financially and psychologically.

However, the personal shoppers and stylists themselves say business is booming. There's an obvious reason for the inconsistency, perfectly explained by Sophie, who has taken to the shops of Ghent with a personal shopper in tow. "I've been given so many compliments on my new look that I don't want to reveal how I put together my new wardrobe," she says. "But maybe one day I'll tell my family and friends."

Karolien doesn't tell everyone she's been shopping with a personal stylist either, because she's afraid some might judge her for this seemingly unnecessary excess. "The truth is that it actually saves you money," she says, "because you stop buying things that you'll never wear, and you learn how to combine the things you already own." And then there are personal priorities coming into play. "I feel it's worth the money because I also enjoy the day out and the extra attention."

Though there are differences between the various services on offer in Flanders, it is safe to say that hiring a personal

shopper or stylist is not exactly cheap – rates can run from €55 per hour to over €300 for a day out. Marie admits that this is the reason she waited over a year to take the plunge: "I've long wanted to work on my personal style and go out to buy new things, but I've always considered it too expensive. You don't just pay a fee for the service, but you end up buying a lot of clothes, too."

Sophie booked her appointment months in advance, allowing her to save up for the shopping spree. "I wasn't worried as much about the fee I had to pay as I was about what I wanted to spend during that one day of shopping," she explains. "I didn't spend more than my regular budget for a new season, but the difference is that I spent it all in two hours' time."

The *Gentenaar* admits that it did make her feel a little uncomfortable at first, as if she had to cross a line. She also bought clothes that were more expensive than she was used to. "But everything I bought is of great quality, fits me perfectly and goes with the rest of my wardrobe," she says. "So I think of it as an investment." That is why next season, Sophie plans to return to her professional shopper, to complete her new wardrobe.

But there's another hurdle to jump if you want to outsource your clothes shopping. Most, if not all, personal shoppers will want to have an initial conversation with a new client to get a good sense of who they are and what they want. They will then go on to point out the things they would change, a process that is not always pleasant. Anyone who's seen the British programme *What Not to Wear* with the ruthless

Trinny and Susannah will understand.

"It was a little embarrassing to have a complete stranger go through my closet and throw out the things she didn't like," says Hilde. But she is quick to add that her personal shopper "was very careful not to hurt my feelings. I really felt like she had my best interests in mind. She was resolute – but respectful." Hilde was impressed enough to re-hire her personal shopper for a second round of shopping.

Laura was quite nervous during her appointment with a personal shopper duo in Antwerp. "I felt like they were X-raying me, and, for some reason, I found it really important what they thought of me," she says. The personal shoppers asked her about her personal life, family and lifestyle in order to better decide what colours and clothing would look best on her. "In a strange way, I felt relieved afterwards," she continues, "because everything they said about me was right. But it was a confronting moment, to say the least."

What is revealing is that, no matter how personal their questions or how steep the fees, all these women found the experience rewarding. They keep the tips and advice in mind for future reference, enjoy their improved wardrobes and... slyly take the credit for their recent transformations.

Not just for girls

Many personal shoppers take male clients, too. They find that men phone them particularly after a divorce. To look sharp for all those upcoming dates? Apparently not. Says Sofie Fobe of Stylinglab in Antwerp: "Most of them were dressed by their wives and found themselves at a loss after their divorce."