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Do you need a style consultant?

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Style consultants can help you look thinner, younger
- Clothes you like make not give you best look
- Client: Consultant cost less than one bad-choice suit
- Expert: Clients need help putting wardrobe together

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By Agnes Le Nart

TEXT SIZE

(LifeWire) -- When it comes to fashion, Deb Busser needs help -- and she knows it.



Deb Busser's black-and-white print brings too much emphasis to her hip line while the wheat suit flatters her figure

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"I don't like shopping," says Busser, a Boston-area corporate speaker and trainer. "I don't think I am particularly good at it. And yet it is important in my work to look really put together."

So about a year ago she hired Ginger Burr, president of Total Image Consultants, to help upgrade her look.

"Ginger's fee was less than the cost of buying the one 'bad' suit that I would probably have chosen without her help," Busser says.

The makeover has been a staple on daytime talk shows for years, but reality television programs like TLC's "What Not to Wear," Bravo's "Tim Gunn's Guide To Style" and most recently Lifetime's "How To Look Good Naked" are spreading the word about how style consultants can help everyday people like Busser get out of their style rut.

Like the stars of these shows, real-life style consultants will spend time paring down an unsuitable wardrobe. Then they'll show a client exactly what to do with what's left, and how to integrate new purchases into what they already own.

"People come to us for a number of reasons, but the overlying theme is that they want to be better seen, heard and understood," says Robin Baab, creative director at The Image Studios, based in Chicago. "We work with everyone from students to rock stars, stay-at-home moms and CEOs."

Help for the rest of us

January is a natural time for people to seek a makeover, says TIC's Burr.

"Right after the new year there does tend to be a wave of interest -- either people who've made a new year's resolution to update their image and are trying to get back on track after the holidays or they've received a makeover as a gift," she says.

The growing popularity of makeover shows on television is a boon for business, too.

"These shows often help women realize that everyone can look good, it's just a matter of making wise choices," Burr says, "Of course, most of them want the help without exposing themselves to millions of viewers."

Shopping days with Burr usually run two to three hours and cost \$160 per hour, in addition to the cost of clothing; other consultants interviewed charge similar fees.

Burr is open to working within a fixed budget, even finding things on sale for her more cost-conscious clients. Most image-consulting firms have hair and makeup experts on staff, or can put you in touch with some, to complete a makeover for a similar fee.

You don't have to hire a consultant to help you choose a new look, however. Many stores offer such services as well.

"As Americans, we generally have a lot of clothing but not necessarily great wardrobes," says Jose Parron, director of the Image Studio at Barneys New York.

"Some people love to shop and they can buy great things, but sometimes they have trouble putting it all together. I take my clients from where they are to where they want to be."

At their first meeting, Parron brought client Dorothy Rabinowitz a black jacket that she fell in love with on the spot. "It was as if he'd read my mind," she says.

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As Parron went through her closet, "I heard a lot of "You can't wear this, you can't wear that," says Rabinowitz, a writer and editor at "The Wall Street Journal." "But he also ended up putting together a number of new outfits with things I'd already owned but didn't know how to wear."

He also managed to get her to wear high heels after decades of living in flats.

There's no charge for taking advantage of the magic touch of personal shoppers at Barneys New York and most other major U.S. department stores. However, you should be prepared to spend a substantial amount of money on clothes. "It's an expensive investment but it's certainly worth it," says Rabinowitz.

Where to start

To find an image or style consultant, ask around: Rabinowitz heard about Parron through her personal trainer.

"Most of my clients come to me by word of mouth, referred by friends or co-workers," says Amanda Sanders, a stylist with New York Image Consultants.

If you're still unsure about a company's credentials, you can ask them to put you in touch with some existing clients to get a feel for how others rate the experience.

Most importantly, be open to change, but make sure you choose someone you're comfortable with and can trust. "Change is hard and personal change is even tougher," says Parron. "You do it when you're ready."

Also, personal shoppers work only at their store and may earn a commission from what you buy.

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