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Shop for a living

Parul Shukla, 29, was always fashion-conscious, colour-coordinated and careful about the décor of her living spaces. But she was also ambitious, so she graduated from London School of Economics and worked as a human resource executive at global financial services companies UBS and Merrill Lynch for seven years - four of them in London.

Last October, tired of the 9-to-5 grind, she finally quit her job. Armed with just her confidence, style and eye for fashion, she launched Image 4 U Consulting, an image consultancy and personal shopping company. Mumbai-based Shukla already has 10 regular clients, each of them with budgets of R40,000 to more than Rs 1 lakh for each shopping excursion.

"My clients include homemakers, young working professionals, expatriates and businessmen's wives," she says. "They are looking to revamp their wardrobe, for elegant home furnishings or a special outfit for a special occasion, among other things."

As disposable incomes grow, drawing more global brands to India's metros, a growing, increasingly wealthy middle- and upper-middle class with little experience or confidence in how to spend or how to choose between high-end brands is finding that it needs help with shopping.

"More personal shoppers have entered the market in the past two to three years," says Abheek Singhi, partner and director, Boston Consulting Group, India. "Their growing number is a combination of disposable incomes going up and a plethora of options to choose from. People in their early 30s are increasingly hiring services of personal shoppers."

Besides many freelancers, at least three new start-ups devoted to personal shopping have come up in Mumbai over the past two years, including Shukla's XY Personal Shoppers and Revive My Vibe. Personal shoppers already in the market find the range of their customers expanding, some come with budgets as small as R5,000 but willing to pay a fee for advice to ensure that their outfit for the next party or wedding is perfect, or that their home looks impressive at their next soirée.

Shukla, for example, begins with a client consultation, to familiarise herself with the buyer's preferences and, for clothes, his or her body type, complexion, etc. Armed with an approximate idea of what the client is looking for, she then identifies stores. "I step in to save time," says Shukla. "My job is to narrow down a list of 15 possible stores to just five, then brief my client on her various options in those five stores." For her efforts, Shukla is paid by the hour. It's an easy job - and one that would have been all but impossible even a decade ago.

But image is becoming more important for lots of people. "Whether you are a homemaker, politician,

doctor or corporate person, personal image has become extremely important," says Anaita Shroff Adajania, Mumbai-based fashion director at Vogue and a personal shopper to selective clients. "There is no time to shop in a leisurely manner and pick out every accessory yourself. Personal shopping is thus an evolving profession and the market for this service is likely to grow and expand."

Diwali is the busiest time of year, say personal shoppers, followed by the wedding season from November to February, Christmas and New Year, says Soojata Kothari, a fashion designer who has worked with designer Hemant Trivedi and specialises in wedding trousseaus. In 2010, she added personal shopping to her portfolio, "because there was just so much demand for it. There are all-season clients too," says Kothari, "mainly yuppie bankers with hefty pay cheques and women with wealthy husbands but no sense of style."

It's not all shoes, clothes and accessories, adds Mumbai-based high-end personal shopper Pallavi Shetty. One of her most testing assignments was shopping for a chandelier. "I scoured the internet and countless stores looking for the right size, the right cut of the glass pieces and the right ornamentation before even suggesting options," she says. "After all, half-baked knowledge of a product can be the death of a personal shopper."

There are also those offering specialised personal shopping, like Delhi-based Binita Rawlley, who helps non-resident Indians and expats select traditional Indian art and handicraft pieces, collectibles and antiques.

With no formal courses in personal shopping, the only prerequisites for tapping into this growing field are confidence, style, an eye for fashion - and good networking skills, so that you can get the best deals. "Rather than professional training," says Shazia Aggarwal, co-founder of personal shopping firm Revive My Vibe, "you need the flair to assemble random pieces of clothing and make them look fabulous, or mix and match fabrics to put together a unique bedsheet."

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