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Articles

Best Buys

Personal Assistant

By Eve Kelly
Published December 27, 2007
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Uncle Max's lady friends come and go, along with their unsolicited shopping advice and their dubious aid in the lifestyle department. But he always comes to me for counsel on the stuff that really matters -- especially now that he's decided that San Diego is where God always intended him to live. At the opening of the Christmas shopping season, he told me what he really wanted this year: a personal assistant. "Someone to help me keep my affairs in order," he explained, "and to make sure the bar is properly stocked.



But I don't have time to interview people. Do you know someone?" I did not -- most of my friends tend to have a hard enough time managing their own lives. But I did have a suggestion: "You want a personal assistant? Call a concierge." "Concierge' is a French term that originated from a word that meant, 'keeper of the candles,'" says Nicole Matthews, owner of the Henley Company, an operation specializing in events and lifestyle Management (thehenleycompany.com). "In medieval times, when someone arrived at a house, it was the keeper of the candles who greeted them and guided them inside. Eventually, it merged into 'keeper of the keys,' and today, the key is the symbol of the concierge. They had access to everything." Matthews has a title of her own: CSEP. "It stands for Certified Special Events Professional. I'm one of about 250 in the world with that certification. You have to do a huge portfolio and take a comprehensive eight-hour exam. You need to know 3000 vocabulary words related to the industry, and you have to create a sample event from start to finish, based on 48 criteria."

Matthews spent around 13 years in corporate events management before striking out on her own 3 years ago. When she did, she added the personal concierge/lifestyle management component to her range of services. "I become their personal assistant. In their professional life, they have an executive assistant or a secretary who manages day-to-day operations. I'm that person in their personal life. That can mean travel arrangements, personal shopping, errands, getting tickets to concerts or sporting events. I take the concept of a hotel concierge and bring it into your personal life."

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She tells a favorite story -- an extreme example to illustrate a point. "I had a colleague who was hired by a single father to sort Legos. His son was hugely into Legos, but it had gotten to the point where he couldn't make sense of them any more -- they were too mixed up. The father gave my colleague pictures of what the Lego constructions should look like, and my colleague spent hours assembling each project and putting them into bags with the pictures. At the end of the day, when the dad came home, the Legos were all organized. It's kind of a funny story, but to that father, the Legos had become a burden, very overwhelming. He was willing to pay for his time. The motto of my company is, 'Live the life you want; delegate the rest.' I really believe in that for my clients."

She mentions a confirmed bachelor, "a regular client who basically can't shop for himself. He has no interest in it, but he has to look nice, so I make sure that happens for him. I'm always just kind of looking for clothes for him when I'm out and about. I'll pick stuff up and take it to his house. If he likes it, he keeps it; if not, I take it back."

A more typical request might involve travel arrangements. "A client called and said, 'In three weeks, we have a week off. Plan a trip.' I booked them on an Alaskan cruise, an inland passage on a small boat -- only 40 people on board." Or gift purchasing: 'I need a bottle of Dom Perignon sent to my brother in Missouri.' Or tickets: "I have access to a few brokers -- that's one of the benefits to being a member of the association."

Given her background in events, it's not surprising to find that Matthews enjoys putting on a show, even on a small scale. "A client had parents traveling to Hawaii for their anniversary. I made reservations for them -- 'Eight o'clock at such-and-such a place.' For something like this, I'll usually speak to the general manager. He faxes me the wine list, and we pick a wine to have sent to the table. I give him the credit card information so the bill is taken care of. My client makes just one call."

Sometimes the scale isn't so small. "I ask my clients, 'What do you want people to talk about on the drive home?' Is it the food? Is it the band? What do you want them to remember? Parties have a lot to do with the chemistry of who's there; it's not something you can necessarily orchestrate. But I once did a surprise 40th birthday party, a pub crawl on an English double-decker bus. The bus pulled up in front of the birthday boy's house, and everyone started making a racket. People who had flown in from England were stashed in different places along the route. We stopped at the birthday boy's favorite places for food and drink, went to an English pub for an hour, and then headed back home where a bagpiper was waiting in the driveway. Inside, we had pub food. We had the double-decker bus logo on the napkins, cups, and nametags. And it didn't cost a fortune -- maybe \$2000 for 60 people."

Matthews's rates run pretty much along industry standards. "If it's virtual work -- stuff I can do from my desk -- it's **\$50 to \$75** an hour. If it's out-of-office, it's **\$75 to \$100**. And event management is **\$125** an hour. I'm also available on a monthly retainer basis."

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