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Shopping for a man

PATCHEN BARSS

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Marie-Claude Pelletier earns her living turning the fashion-challenged into Beau Brummels

Marie-Claude Pelletier is shopping for a man. Actually, she likes to browse around for several guys every week. Insatiable, you think? Maybe so, but she does her job so well that these men end up paying her.

Pelletier, 30, runs Les Effrontés, a clothes-shopping service for men who don't have the time or the interest to shop on their own.



These days, she makes her living at it, but her business began as a game about a year ago, when she went shopping on behalf of a friend's boyfriend.

"My friends were telling me, 'Men's fashion is so boring. My boyfriend looks like s--t - he's always wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and there's nothing for him in stores,' " she said.

Pelletier whose background is in men's fashion design, was shocked -not at her friend's harsh criticism, but at their ignorance about men's fashion.

"You have all different styles for all different types of women. It's the same for men."

The upshot: Pelletier and her friend's boyfriend went shopping. The result: "His girlfriend called me the same night to say, 'He'll never go shopping alone again. It will be always with you.' "

Pelletier, who charges \$50 an hour for her service (most jobs take two or three hours), has dressed more than 50 men since then, and now has four or five clients a week.

About a month ago Marc Prévost, an associate producer at the television network Réseau des Sports, found out on a Thursday that he was going to an awards ceremony the following Sunday. He worked in jeans or Gap pants.

Prévost doesn't like shopping, and had no time to do it anyway. His girlfriend phoned Pelletier at 11:30 Thursday night. "The next day, she had two suits for me," he said.

"I had little hesitation before I tried the pants on", he said. "They were sort of stretch pants. It's a new style, supposedly. I don't follow that much. But they were very comfortable, very chic, very clean."

Prévost says he felt great in the clothes, and got lots of positive comments from co-workers at the ceremony. His girlfriend, Julie Rochette, said that when she saw him in his new suit, "I felt in love again." The bill came up to 755\$, plus one hour of Pelletier's time. "But I was so happy I also gave her a bottle of wine," Prévost said.

Dissatisfied girlfriends scheming to transform their fellas from schmoes into beaus should take note - Pelletier is not running a boyfriend-improving service. True, she only shops for men, but if the guy's not into it, Pelletier won't take the case.

Personable, unpretentious, and adamantly non-judgemental, Pelletier is good at putting people at ease. She generally begins by meeting her clients for coffee.

"After 15 minutes, it's just like talking to a friend. They don't feel that I will laugh at them or judge them. They just talk, and it gives me a lot of information to go shopping for them," she said. "Sometimes we don't even talk about clothes."

She does need a few crucial pieces of information -she has to know, for instance, where he'll wear her wares- does he need clothes for work, the week-end, a wedding, a wild night on the town? Other big determining factors are body type, personality and job -an architect dresses differently from an accountant.

Armed with this information, Pelletier finds it unnecessary for the client to accompany her to the stores. All the clients has to do is try the clothes on, either at his workplace or at her studio in Old Montreal.

Stores such as Harry Rosen and Holt Renfrew offer a shopping service for men, but Pelletier has the advantage of not being affiliated with a particular store. She has an extensive network of distributors and suppliers, but she is not a wholesaler. Her cheapest jobs end up costing the client about 700\$, but a boy with a bigger budget can get more options.

Another of Pelletier's rules: No saying no until you've tried the clothes on. Usually her clients are enthusiastic, but if they do balk, it is when they first see the clothes. Pelletier will not accept refusal at this point.

"There's a lot of fabric they don't know about, like pants with stretch in them. You'll never know how comfortable it is unless you try it on. And then you'll say, 'Oh, I like that!' "

With the enforcement of this rule, Pelletier hasn't had a dissatisfied customer yet.

So, for their money, her clients save time, and end up with a coordinated wardrobe suited to their lifestyle.

She also keeps records, so when the client comes back to her six months later (as many have) she can expand on what they already own.

Pelletier has begun selling gift certificates, and has plans for a Web site, but she doesn't want to expand Les Effrontés too quickly. You get the impression that her life is kind of ideal right now. She spends her weeks shopping, and sitting in cafés with men. And she generally leaves them feeling better about themselves than when she found them.

"I like to go shopping, but it's nothing compared to seeing the guy feel very happy about himself, and when people notice that he has style, I'm happy about that."