

shopping


EVER WISHED SHOPPING COULD BE THIS...

FAST

FUN

FABULOUS?



A woman is shown from the waist down, wearing a black, knee-length, wrap-style skirt and gold, high-heeled, open-toe shoes. She has her hands on her hips and is wearing a large, colorful ring on her right hand and a gold watch on her left wrist. To her right, there are several shopping bags: a yellow one with 'SELFRIDGES' and 'shop online at selfridges.com', a black one with 'ANS', a stack of black and white striped bags, and a red one with 'www.todbak.com'.

Love buying new things, but put off by the idea of pounding the pavement? Jo Craven set out to land a bargain in less time, with less money

THE TRUTH IS, I'm a shopping flirt. I put in the requisite effort, researching new trends by reading lots of magazines and newspapers and always visiting new boutiques. I even write myself Post-its of the 'find skirt with split' variety. But I very rarely close the deal by spending money.

It's not that I'm a skinflint, but things get in the way. It's too hot in the shop, I haven't time to try it on, or I have two children with me who are hiding behind the clothes rails. Often I end up calling the whole thing off, frustrated but certain I'll be back.

But not this time. For once, I'm going to shop with a purpose. SHE has asked me to trial three strategies – hiring a personal stylist, shopping online and following tips to become my own stylist for the day – in order to put the fun (and speed) back into the whole process. It's time to shop like I mean it. ▷



Talking fashion over a cup of coffee



Daniella finds me the ideal dress - with sleeves!



I loved trying on Daniella's suggestions



Wrap dress, £345, Tory Burch



- 1 Read the small print. With some stores, personal shopping services are free - others may need a minimum spend, or charge a booking fee.
- 2 Be sure of what you want - evening or work clothes - but be open-minded about new styles.
- 3 Consider a personal stylist if you require a more comprehensive service, such as a wardrobe edit*.



Settling down for a bit of retail therapy

THE EXPERIMENT PERSONAL SHOPPING

I'd always considered personal shopping to be the preserve of women with more time and money than the rest of us. So when I contacted Harvey Nichols to book a personal shopping appointment, the most important thing was that I wouldn't end up feeling like some 'me-me-me' character who needed her ego stroking. At 40, I didn't want anyone to flatter me or tell me I deserved it.

But I needn't have worried; personal shopper Daniella was smiling and calm. Over coffee, she quizzed me about my favourite colours, cuts and trends. I explained that I like boat-neck tops, wasn't interested in anything clingy, short or shiny, and that dresses needed to have sleeves. My budget was £300 for an entire outfit. I told her that I didn't feel the need to dress younger, but would love to know what she thought was age-appropriate. I also explained that, as a freelance journalist who often commutes into London, I'd ideally like one outfit that I could attend a meeting in, which could also be dressed up if I decided to stay for a drink in town. Nothing like a tall order!

At Harvey Nichols, you can go out on the shop floor with your personal shopper, but I wanted to be surprised, and feared I'd be too indecisive anyway. So off Daniella dashed to find me something. 'Good luck,' I thought as I dipped my biscuit in my coffee and sank back into the white leather banquette in the personal shopping suite. She came back with a dozen pieces (including,

cleverly, a nude bra and a pair of flats and heels) that were exciting in ways I hadn't anticipated.

Although I rejected several items - sequins and ruffles? Not my style - there was a Tory Burch dress that had the all-important sleeves and snazzy details such as a leather belt and good quality buttons. But best of all was a pair of cord trousers that honestly knocked two inches off my thighs, and a pastel striped top I would never have picked but which seemed to elongate me. And who doesn't like a bit of elongation? As Daniella explained, the eye travels up the wide stripes, rather than side to side. It was this kind of tip, and her ability to pick pieces that seemed uninspiring on the hanger but transformative when worn that I appreciated the most.

I was interested to discover that, counter-intuitively perhaps, the recession has sparked a boom in personal shopping. According to Daniella, women come in with a budget they can't exceed and it is a personal shopper's task to make them stick to it. I would definitely go back and spend more time with Daniella, if only for her skill in opening my eyes.



SCORE CARD

TIME: 5/5 - Most appointments last several hours, but after just one hour, the results were amazing.
MONEY: 3/5 - Next time, I'd try to find cheaper clothes in the store.
OUTFIT SATISFACTION: 4/5

TESTING OUT ONLINE 'INTUITIVE' SHOPPING

First, a confession. I've only ever bought clothing online once - and even then it was a jacket I'd already physically tried on in the shop. In the past I've *very nearly* bought hundreds of outfits online, but after hours of merrily tracking down the perfect coat or dress and adding them to my 'wishlist', I've always balked at the final hurdle. Call me old-fashioned, but not being able to try an outfit on, regardless of being able to spin a model dummy 360 degrees, has always left me with doubt about its fit. But many friends are fans, and I know it's about time I took the plunge. I start to find myself looking forward to testing Boutiques.com, a new website from Google.

Launched in the US six months ago, Boutiques.com isn't a typical online store, more a giant shop window linking to thousands of other online shops. Plug in 'white shirt', for example, and hundreds of options, from GAP to Michael Kors, pop up. It also offers celebrity-edited selections and - this is the big draw - promises to 'intuitively' suggest clothes based on your style preferences.

First, I take the five-minute 'Styler' test. Once finished, an email confirmation comes through and I click on their edit. I can honestly say I wouldn't have bought one single item. Diamanté skulls on biker boots, anyone? Next, I dig around the 'celebrity boutiques', edited by A-listers such as Carey Mulligan. (When



shopping



Blouse, £125, Malene Birger.
Trousers, £225, DVF

SHOP TIP

- 1 Look out for loyalty schemes that allow you to earn points as you shop online.
- 2 Always check returns policies, including the length of time you have to return purchases.
- 3 Know what day of the week items arrive so you can shop for the new season must-haves first.
- 4 Know your size as designers vary. Many e-tailers have useful advice about sizing.



Shopping with a strategy



Looking for classic styles



New coat = high street success!



Jacket, £275, Reiss

SHOP TIP

- 1 Throw all of your clothes on the floor and pick up items at random to make an outfit. It might look odd but it's a good way to experiment.
- 2 Before you go shopping check your wardrobe for gaps: have you got an LBD, a white shirt, a good pair of trousers?
- 3 If you're in a clothes rut, try everything on. Even if you're unsure about a piece, you won't know if you like it unless you try it.

Boutiques.com launches in the UK, apparently the likes of Alexa Chung will create boutiques.) The best bit is that pieces from high-end designers such as Balenciaga sit next to almost identical high street items from, say, Mango.

I select a Malene Birger silk blouse and DVF cargo pants from Carey Mulligan's style pages. Clicking on the items, I'm led to net-a-porter.com and selfridges.com, both sites that are very easy to navigate. The only hiccup occurs with delivery. Although I paid £9.50 extra for next-day delivery from Selfridges, the trousers arrived two days (and several phone calls) late. Net-a-porter's one-to-two-day delivery also turned into three days. Not ideal if you're buying for a special event.

It's these sort of delivery shenanigans that could put me off online shopping. But even though, ultimately, the items didn't fit properly, I'm impressed with the huge range available, the friendliness of the support staff at Selfridges, and that returning the items is free. I know many people who shop online successfully and have the returns system cracked. And on a wet February day, who really wants to hit the shops?



SCORE CARD

TIME: 2/5 – The deliveries were late.
MONEY: 3/5 – The cheaper clothes are online, the less confident I felt about them so I probably spent more than usual.
OUTFIT SATISFACTION: 3/5

DISCOVERING MY OWN INNER STYLIST

My final challenge is to pull together as many shopping tips and tactics as possible and become my own stylist for the day. In other words, I'll be abandoning my usual 'styling' approach – which involves mismatched impulse buys and a bi-annual sweep of Gap for cashmere pullovers and boy-cut chinos – and actually make a plan.

I start by tearing pages out of every magazine I can get my hands on. In no time at all, I have created a mood board and compiled a comprehensive shopping list. What I really want, I realise after perusing the photos, is a smart jacket that I can wear to meetings.

Next, I conduct a full 'wardrobe edit' to identify any fashion gaps. It's a mighty task, and I must report that my greatest need is for new. I have a lot of coats, plenty of scruffy shoes and multiple options should I ever need to attend the Oscars – but barely anything that says 'smart, on-trend enough without trying too hard'. My jeans are all a bit faded. I lack a current look and need to refresh. There's colour on the horizon for 2011 and I have a feeling that my bobby electric blue tank top is just not going to cut it.

Lastly, I arm myself with some key words that sum up my style identity: 'tailoring', 'classic', and a bit of 'edge' and promise myself to dutifully buy only items that meet these

criteria. Cos, Whistles and Reiss here I come.

I'm in heaven in Cos. With everything I learned during my personal shopping experience fresh in my mind, I steer clear of the usual 'safe' shopping suspects – such as the cotton day coats they do so well and their sheath dresses. Instead, I plump for a long knitted red and white, wide-striped sweater dress, a vivid tangerine shirt and several dresses. The eventual winners are a coffee-coloured cropped cotton coat and a grey marl sweatshirt with leather elbow pads. I absolutely love them and they look really expensive. At Reiss I try on a leather jacket and several other classic pieces with an edgy twist.

Not only has my afternoon as my own stylist taught me that the high street has come a long way in dressing 30- and 40-something women, but I've also realised just how important it is to shop armed with a plan. So from now on, there will be no more aimless wandering – or haring through the shops searching for a new top two hours before an important meeting. ●



SCORE CARD

TIME: 3/5 – Prep time took ages; but if you can free up a weekday morning the shops are empty.
MONEY: 4/5 – The prices were good.
OUTFIT SATISFACTION: 5/5

➤ **HOW DO YOU LIKE TO SHOP?** Let us know by emailing editor@shemagazine.co.uk

