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FM LIFE

12 December 2008

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Too busy to cook, let alone shop? The concept of having a lifestyle manager is catching on among busy executives, writes Jacqui Pile



Here's a solution for time-pressed executives: the lifestyle manager. Described as a cross between a personal assistant and a 1950s housewife, this new breed of personal concierge will whip up a dinner for 10 at your home, get you invited to a star-studded film premiere, remind you about your anniversary or stock your fridge with your favourite brand of mineral water. Part social adviser, confidential secretary and even handyman, there are few limits to what a lifestyle manager won't do.

Overseas, the industry has taken off - and not just among the super-wealthy and celebrities.

Alex Cheattle, the CEO of TenUK, one of the biggest British lifestyle management companies, says having a lifestyle manager will soon seem as natural as having a GP. The company has raised the benchmark in personal service. It has provided one client with advice on how his son could prepare for university interviews, suggested Tantric sex teachers for failing marriages and tracked down breakdancing teachers for MTV-mad teenagers.

WHO TO CONTACT

- The Desk
www.thedesk.co.za
 0861-345-000
- My Life Organised
www.mylifeorganised.co.za
 082-963-7234 or 084-641-1290
- Quintessentially
www.quintessentially.com
 (011) 911-4200

In SA, though the concept of having a lifestyle manager has taken longer to catch on, small agencies are popping up to meet the demand.



Carole Day

"Working professionals, who understand the value of their time, are buying into the idea," says The Desk MD Carole Day. "Once they've had this type of back-up, there's no going back."

She says requests from clients can be as small as finding a pet hamster for a child or as big as organising an around-the-world trip for a family, along with finding an au pair or caterer, or even hiring a yacht.

Day adds that trust between lifestyle manager and client is essential. "We have access to some clients' bank accounts to be able to pay their bills, so confidentiality is central to the way we work."

Companies have also started offering personal concierge memberships to their executives as a perk. "It helps bring down absenteeism and improve productivity because directors aren't distracted by personal admin," says Day.

Clearly the fees are not for everyone - a block of eight hours costs R2 400 and unlimited memberships can soar over the R100 000 mark, though it is possible to buy the services by the hour.

But these are not just companies that pick up the dry-cleaning or drop the dog at the vet; they offer a highly personalised service.



Caro Fisher



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Owner of My Life Organised (MLO) Caro Fisher says requests range from the mundane to the extraordinary. One client wanted the company to investigate the possibility of rescuing a mistreated lion in a zoo in Eastern Europe and relocating it to SA.

"We've done everything from sorting e-mails and filing to buying quirky personal gifts," says Fisher.

Most requests revolve around the home, adds MLO's Jo'burg partner, Ciska Thurman. This means stepping in to meet contractors at a client's home, organising events - such as Christmas dinners or children's parties - and sorting out bills.

"These are professionals who can't step out of the office during the day to wait around for a Telkom repairman," she says.

The Desk's and MLO's client bases are made up mostly of working professionals - women who return to work after maternity leave, bachelors who travel a lot and male married executives whose partners work too.

Both also serve "swallows", people who live abroad but own SA properties, which they visit once or twice a year. Both The Desk and MLO take care of all aspects of maintenance of the house while the owner is away and ensure that it's fully stocked and serviced when they're around, too.

The big difference, of course, between the UK and SA is that most people are able to afford domestic help.

"Many of our clientele will have a personal assistant at work and a housekeeper at home," says Thurman. "But a PA shouldn't be collecting dry-cleaning and housekeepers perhaps aren't appropriate to be paying the bills. Clients ask us to do the tasks they feel uncomfortable delegating to their existing staff."

Thurman, who describes herself as being obsessively organised and logistically minded, personally assesses clients in their homes to get a better idea of how they work and their personal taste.

One of MLO's clients, corporate actuary at Hannover Re Susan Atkinson, had a to-do list that ran longer than two pages. As a busy executive, she found that she just couldn't get to the things that needed fixing, stocking, sorting and filing at home.

"I had all kinds of individual, personal things that I needed to do which were never quite urgent enough to prioritise ahead of my work commitments."

Atkinson hired MLO to help her tackle the list - and hasn't looked back.

"I've finally started doing things I've always wanted to do, but haven't had the time for," she says. "I felt we could start the renovations we had wanted to make years ago."

These boutique operators share the market with larger lifestyle management companies such as Quintessentially, a UK-based firm with offices in Cape Town and Jo'burg, which has been operating here since 2004.

IT'S SORTED

- ★ Weekly grocery shopping, including unpacking: R250 (1-2 hours)
- ★ Personalised gift shopping for the family: R600 (3 hours)
- ★ Sorting out incorrect municipal bill: R400 (2 hours)
- ★ Organising dinner party for 10, including menu choice, shopping and recipes - all delivered ready to prepare: R400 (1-2 hours)
- ★ Pick-up and delivery of prescriptions: R300 (half an hour)

The above rates provide to My Life Organised

Quintessentially prides itself on its connections. Need direct access to a famous artist, designer or musician? They'll organise. An invitation to the Cannes Film Festival, Elton John's white-tie-and-tiara ball? Consider it done. But, be warned, memberships start at R7 500/year and go up to R270 000.

On the elite packages clients have access to personal account managers in the 45 countries in which Quintessentially operates.

"We build up a database on each client, which means we know how many children you have, what type of theatre shows you enjoy, even whether you're allergic to shellfish," she says.

Though the company isn't as focused on the domestic sphere as The Desk and MLO, Quintessentially SA MD Sarah McGrath says clients receive preferential rates due to the company's relationships with the best laundries, tailors, wardrobe advisers, life coaches, caterers and other linch pins of the efficient household.

As lifestyle management evolves, more companies are likely to develop specialist advice. TenUK, for example, has recently launched a "green" concierge service to advise clients on how to make their home more energy-efficient, sourcing the most environmentally friendly car or putting together an environmentally aware holiday.

At the moment, these services may seem decadent and unnecessary, especially in tough economic times. But as the work pace gets more frenetic, it's a small step towards achieving that elusive work-life balance.



Ten Lifestyle Management

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www.TenLifestyle.com

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www.StyleAware.co.uk

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An exclusive shopping and styling session with our qualified stylist
www.StyleLiberation.co.uk

As Fisher puts it: "It's about helping clients buy back time."



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