

Busy? They'll take care of it

Once the domain of the hollywood Elite, personal assistants have gone mainstream, helping those too occupied to take care of themselves or their families

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His marriage was over and his wife had moved out with the lion's share of furniture and kitchen utensils. A long-time Montreal investment advisor, he preferred playing golf and racket sports to shopping for sofas, pots, whisks and spoons.

What to do?

He turned to Votre Valet, a local concierge business that caters to people too busy to take care of themselves and their families.

Owner Mare Dimitropoulos provides a gamut of services, from helping to start up new businesses to picking up dry cleaning and, in the financial advisor's case, setting up house.

"There you are, trying to scramble eggs but you can't find anything," said the 59-year-old man, who asked to remain anonymous because he was reluctant to have his personal travails made public.

"The first thing Mare did was tell me what every old bachelor should have in his kitchen. Then, she had a guy come in to redo the floors, and a painter. Now she's shopping for furniture for me."

Dimitropoulos, and sisters Karen and Paula Quinn, who run Les Concierges K&P, are pioneers in the Montreal area of this one-stop-shopping concept that is already a phenomenon in the rest of North America.

"No day is the same," said Dimitropoulos, who uses about 40 subcontractors, from fitness instructors to chefs, computer experts, mechanics and handymen, to serve the varied needs of her clients. She charges \$55 an hour, while a block of three consecutive hours goes for a flat rate of \$150.



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Votre Valet owner Mare Dimitropoulos (right) helps Adonna Greaves with the numerous details involved in opening a fitness studio.

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Begun in New York and Los Angeles back in the 1990s, the concept of hiring someone to deal with everything from buying new snow tires to planning vacations has since spread to places such as Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto. From Vancouver's Jeeves At Home to Simply Done Personal Assistants in Halifax, they're all fighting for a share of a market that has been growing ever since cell phones, laptops and PDAs expanded the office from the confines of four walls.

While it's impossible to say how many concierge businesses are operating right now in Canada, Katherine Parris of Toronto's Parris Concierge remarks from her office that she gets called every day from someone announcing that they're opening a new one.

"There are tons of them. It can get pretty crazy," said Parris, who started her company five years ago and caters to Toronto's business community. "But there's a need, too. People need a 'best friend' to deal with tasks they no longer have time for, no matter how big or small."

Karen Quinn of Montreal's K&P charges from \$35 to \$50 an hour and has a fleet of subcontractors at her disposal. She says Montreal has been slower to catch on to the trend for a number of reasons, not the least of which has to do with language. The notion of concierge in French is more in line with janitorial services and building maintenance than with the kind of personalized service offered by five-star hotels.

"When we began six years ago, we had a really hard time getting through to people," Quinn said. "One company we kept calling, I'd ask to be put through to human resources and without fail, the receptionist heard the name Concierges K&P and put us through to a department where the message was 'Hi, this is Bob and Tom. We'll get back to you.' It took a few calls to realize that Bob and Tom were the janitors."

Another reason for the slowness, she ventured, is that Quebecers are moving around a lot more, while the traditional support network of mothers, grandmothers and other sundry family members all have busy lives of their own.

Whatever the reasons, Quinn, who works from her West Island home, where she lives with her husband, three sons and three miniature poodles, says that since that initial scramble for clients when they started five and a half years ago, she and her sister haven't looked back.

Mostly, they have relied on word of mouth. These days, they are busy doing everything from finding that perfect pair of slippers for someone's mother to helping newcomers to town negotiate Quebec bureaucracy and executives find boats.

That's right. Boats.

More specifically, Quinn and her sister once found a 27-foot second-hand sailboat in the Ottawa area for Yvan Petit, whose job as director of planning services for Ericsson Research Canada left no wiggle room for combing the classified in Montreal, never mind elsewhere. The following year, they found him a Zodiac.

"They provide a level of comfort," Petit said. "I think of them like a friend whom you constantly call to ask for help."

Eli Pichelli, who runs the West Island office of financial services firm Clarica, says he never knew a service like this existed until someone introduced him to Quinn several years ago. Now, she's his chief organizer.

"I can't speak for all Quebecers, but honestly, if I ever did think about, I would have assumed it was something for the rich and famous of the world," he said.

"Things change. Today, for example, I called Karen in a panic because a venue I'd booked for a business meeting hadn't gotten back to me. I cancelled them and left Karen to do all the legwork at the last minute."

Like the Quinn sisters, Dimitropoulos's start 18 months ago was painfully slow. She thought her phone would be ringing off the hook from the get-go. After all, the former high-flying travel management executive had already met lots of people through local charity and networking events, and she'd distributed fliers all over town.

But the phone remained silent.

"Here, I'd come out of a corporate world where it was 'Mare, I need this,' 'Mare, I need that.' I really thought, 'Oh, Mare is really needed,' " she said.

"All of a sudden, I wasn't needed. All of a sudden, 'Mare' didn't exist anymore. It was hard. My friends fed me, my family sent me money and when I wasn't out stumping with fliers, I watched a lot of Oprah, 4 o'clock every weekday."

Once one client came on board, though, another one followed, and another after that.

One of the first was personal trainer Adonna Greaves, who'd met Dimitropoulos in Toronto and initially hired her to help market fitness clothing imported from Brazil. More recently, Dimitropoulos has been front and centre as Greaves builds a 5,600-square-foot training studio she plans to open by the middle of this month. (NOVEMBER)

From helping with the pricing strategy through to choosing 450 towels and interviewing potential staff, Dimitropoulos has proved a lifesaver, Greaves says.

"I'm not a business-minded individual, and I don't necessarily market myself very well," she said. "Mare helps put things a little bit clearer in my mind."

For more information about personal concierge services, visit www.kandp.ca, or call the company at (514) 693-0255.

Votre Valet can be found at www.votrevalet.ca, or you can call 514-791-7764.

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