

A concierge for all seasons: the decline of do-it-yourself, and the rise of do-it-for-me services

Joanna Pachner, **National Post** Published: Thursday, December 27, 2007



Nathan Denette/National Post

It's hard not to giggle when you open the door to find a fully liveried butler - especially when he looks like Jayson Gagnard. The founder of VIP Services Inc., a Toronto personal concierge service, Mr. Gagnard is tall, lanky and only 22, and dressed in his company's uniform he looks like a teenager trick-or-treating on Halloween. But he's all business and clearly at my service from first greeting. "I'm Jayson. What can we do for you today?"

A good question, and one more and more businesses are posing seductively to overworked, overscheduled, overstressed urbanites. In the past few years, there's been an explosion of services and technologies that offer to give us back time in exchange for money, bringing labour-saving innovation into areas that didn't seem a problem until a cunning solution came along. These range from the ingenious (by-the-hour labour for pesky odd jobs around the house) to the dubious (wheelchairs in Las Vegas casinos for gamblers too lazy to foot it from the slots to the buffet) to the moronic (Motor-Powered Self-Twirling Spaghetti Fork), but they're clearly tapping a hungry market. The growth in personal concierges, virtual assistants and various errand runners has been especially lively. Mr. Gagnard reports that when he started VIP three years ago, there were just two other companies in the Toronto area; as of late summer, there were almost 40.

According to Statistics Canada, we spend almost 30% of our waking hours doing unpaid labour, from cooking and laundry to pet care and landscaping. This load weighs especially heavily on women, who spend twice as much time on household chores as men, just as they did 40 years ago. StatsCan estimates that Canadians perform \$280-billion worth of unpaid household work. So why not pay someone to do it for us?

As a moderately well-off, working, married mom with two young kids, I cross the two demographics the personal-services industry most covets: busy families and harried professionals. At our first meeting, Mr. Gagnard assures me he's ready to do anything - "as long as it's legal and moral" - to make my life easier (at \$50 an hour, though he's waiving his fee for the

sake of publicity). He's like a fairy godmother, yet I find it hard at first to come up with errands I feel comfortable outsourcing. When I consult my husband (the family chef) about handing off grocery shopping, he frowns: "I don't want him picking out our vegetables."

Apparently, this is a common scenario. "We have to more or less teach our clients to think of us when tasks come up," says Mr. Gagnard, which is why he encourages initial in-person consultations. "This gives the concierge an opportunity to build a rapport with the client which is extremely important when a client is offloading their to-do list to a new face," he says. "But once we gain their trust, we go from picking up their dry cleaning to picking up their children from school!"

I decide to trust Mr. Gagnard with our groceries, plus ask him to return wine and beer bottles, put up our Christmas lights and find a gift for my six-year-old's teacher. To throw him a curve, I also ask him to look into a photography course I'm thinking of giving hubby for Christmas - not some hour-long lesson at a shopping mall Black's, a real inspiring experience. None of my requests faze Mr. Gagnard in the least, and I see why when he relates some recent errands: waiting in line at 2 a.m. in front of an art gallery to buy a painting, finding impossible-to-get tickets to hit musical Dirty Dancing, and, perhaps most memorably, arranging for a plane to fly by the CN Tower trailing a banner with a marriage proposal to a woman dining inside with VIP's client. The company even makes regular trips to Buffalo to locate cross-border deals on clients' behalfs. So when I run through my list, he simply says, "Not a problem. How soon do you need this?" They can fulfill most requests within four hours.

It wasn't long ago that "do it yourself" was the buzzword of the day, as digital technology enabled us to do everything from publishing to music recording at home. The "nesting" trend that followed the 9/11 attacks sent people flocking to magazines and TV shows instructing how to do your own home renovations, arrange your own bouquets or organize your memories in a scrapbook. But something's changed. DIY has given way to DIFM - do it for me. Even Home Depot, that staple of the industrious home tinkerer, is expanding its installation services to jack up flagging growth. And somewhere along the line, scrapbooking went from a trendy hobby to a chore that personalized scrapbooking services now offer to take off your hands. With studies showing that 92% of workers take sick days just to run their errands, employers are moving beyond on-site daycares and massage services to make it easier for workers to pull those long hours. Microsoft employees get free grocery delivery, and many companies, especially in the United States, offer to provide dinners that late-working staff can take home to their families.

Personal concierges are one of the most popular new corporate perks, being offered to employees by the likes of Ernst & Young and Telus.

Naturally, this time of year comes with all kinds of seasonal chores that enterprising businesses are happy to take over. Florists will trim your Christmas tree, while Christmas lights installation is now available from many landscapers and handymen. Toronto's Rent-a-Son, which sends young men to clients' houses to help with manual labour, finds this a popular service on top of such other tasks as ripping out old carpets, assembling furniture or stomping on grapes (they assure that's not a joke).

Having others do your chores is how the rich have always lived, but businesses catering to the upper crust are moving down-market. Chauffeurs, a mainstay of the executive elite, find time-strapped parents a promising new niche. Alexander Limousine Service in Toronto, for example, has parent clients who carpool their kids to school each day in the company's stretch limos. At \$200 a week split between two or three families, the cost can beat public transportation. Making your kids instantly cool? Priceless.

Typically, it's the most unpleasant chores that we offload first. Hence the spread of house cleaning companies, snow and leaf removal businesses and organizing services like Vancouver's Good Riddance, "designed to manage the struggle with clutter people neither have the time nor the patience to handle alone." Co-owner Heather Knittel will come to your home to arrange anything from a single closet to the whole house. After about three years in business, "finally the public has realized that, wow, this is a valuable service!" she thrills.

Few tasks are more nasty than cleaning dog poop off your backyard after melting snow reveals the mounds. "It's a huge gross-out factor. I have guys who can't look at the stuff," says James Beagle. Landscapers he used to work for would refuse to cut the grass until the dog poo was removed. Bingo: Super Scoopers was born. His company now offers anything from a single clean-up (\$30 minimum) to a weekly service, picking up the waste and disposing of it at sewage treatment plants. Dog doo-doo used to be a sideline to Mr. Beagle's landscaping business but now it alone supports up to four employees in the summer - and there are 10 rival services in the GTA. I marvel at having a regular service scooping up after your pet, but Mr. Beagle (yes, that's his real name) suggests it's all about disposable income looking for a place to be disposed. "People think, my backyard is my sanctuary and I don't want to spend my time looking for dog poop," he says.

"We can afford it. People are lazy by nature, so if you make it easy for them, they're going to buy from you."

How did we get to the point where we lack the energy to slice our own apples or organize our memories? As usual, blame the Baby Boomers, that notoriously self-indulgent and free-spending generation. But their children are also driving demand for time-saving short cuts with their emphasis on work-family balance. Darryl Grigg, a Vancouver psychologist who consults for companies on creating healthy workplaces, says leisure time is critical, and underrated today. "We coach people on the idea that personal leisure is part of family life balance. Moms and dads end up serving everyone, then what's left, usually crumbs, is for them."

Still, Mr. Grigg sees some of the things we're outsourcing as a misguided attempt at free-time nirvana. "There's something good and healthy about making dinner for your family. It's like we want everything to be done for us so we'll have this time unfettered with life." After all, what are we saving time for if not for family, hobbies and other things we treasure and enjoy? In the October issue of *Vanity Fair*, Jim Windolf charts how the spread of labour-saving gadgets and services is creating a "Lazy-Ass Nation" with a "can-do-but-why-bother spirit." A Los Angeles service will send people to come and play with your kids while New York area companies are willing to potty-train your toddler and teach your child to ride a bike, for a fee of course. A recent episode of doctor drama *Private Practice* featured an expectant father who sent an assistant to attend a class for new dads on his behalf. Ridiculous? It's probably happened.

This notion hits home to me when my own personal concierge sends a list of suggested gifts for my son's teacher. He's taken the trouble to poll four teachers who are clients and, not surprisingly, they report that the most memorable presents they've received were homemade, such as Christmas ornaments and cookies. The irony resonates deafeningly: this is, after all, an exercise in saving my time. Naturally, the thought flashes through my mind: Should I get Mr. Gagnard to make some ornaments on my son's behalf? More importantly, does the thought still count if you paid someone else to come up with it?

I'm sure Mr. Gagnard wouldn't blink at the request, but I conclude there are things best done yourself, and not just to avoid guilt. When he delivers my groceries, I find the Swiss cheese sliced too thick for my liking and I wanted breaded chicken strips, not cooked ones, but there's only so much detail you can provide before the shopping list itself become a chore. When Mr. Gagnard

sends me a round-up of photography classes he's found, none of them quite matches what I had in mind. Maybe it doesn't exist, but only a personal search will fully reassure me of that.

Still, when Mr. Gagnard completes all the errands, I give him one more: find a personal concierge in London, Ont. My brother, whose wife just delivered their second child, will surely appreciate such help in the new-baby chaos. And I swear, I thought of it all by myself.