

From disarray to design: Wardrobe stylist fashions a fit for clients at a crossroads

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By Celene Adams

It's been said that our closets are "time capsules" of our lives.

Every time we open their doors and survey their contents, we're presented with who we are, who we've been, who we want to be and how far we are from being where we want to go.

So it comes as no surprise to Debbie Roes, a San Diego-based wardrobe stylist, that clients often consult her when they're facing a turning point in their lives.

"Whether they're returning to the dating scene, getting married, job hunting, being promoted, moving into middle age, or making a weight change, people tend to want to adjust how they dress when they move from one stage of life to another," Roes, a former life coach with a master's degree in psychology, said.



Yet, while clients are often motivated to achieve the objectives that such transitions inspire – looking sexier, more professional, or younger, for instance – the transformation process often yields deeper rewards than appearance.

"Clients are often surprised by the memories that return and what they learn about their attitudes toward their bodies and spending," Roes said. "It's not just clothes. My process works on multiple levels."

In business one year, Roes is herself somewhat surprised at her new line of work. Because even though she's always been fascinated by fashion, she never dreamed she could become a stylist.

"I had an eating disorder for about 20 years," the tall, willowy brunette said. "I've been about 50 pounds lighter than I am now and 40 pounds heavier. But whatever my weight, I always felt uncomfortable with how I looked. And even though I've always liked fashion ... because I had body-image issues, I dressed in ... lots of flowing, baggy clothes."

It wasn't until Roes approached 40 that she began to want to emerge from all the fabric she'd been hiding behind.

"I wanted to look more polished and sophisticated," she said, but, at the time, "I could have been nominated for 'What Not to Wear.'"

The TV show, in which two stylists make over a fashion "train wreck," was Roes' constant companion for five years, as she searched for ways to express herself through clothing. She watched every episode, reviewed every rerun, and supplemented what she was learning by reading "volumes" about fabric, fit, and fashion. But even

after discovering which looks worked for her, why, and how to achieve them, she couldn't see beyond her new appearance.

"If you had asked me back then whether I would ever get into doing this myself, I would have said, 'Are you crazy? I couldn't do that,'" she said.

Roes' lack of confidence was exacerbated by the fact that, although her eating disorder was abating, she also suffered from clothes hoarding, a condition that affects about 5 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Consequently, it wasn't until Roes addressed her hoarding issues, in part by hiring a professional organizer to perform an audit on her cluttered closet, that she began to see more than style in her reflection. Now she also saw substance and skill.

Closet audits are the first stage of any wardrobe redo. In an audit, a stylist assesses clients' existing wardrobes, reviewing what works, what doesn't, which items can be altered, and which pieces the client never wears but could if they knew what to wear them with.

Roes' own closet audit took six hours, she said. But although most clients don't need anything near that much time, this initial step is usually the one they find most intimidating. After all, not only are their past and present lives on display, so to speak, but the audit requires them to try on outfits they already own.

"Do I have to take off my clothes in front of you?" is a frequently asked question," Roes said, laughing.

The intimacy of the closet audit, however, is where her personal background becomes especially handy.

"I think the fact that I have the background in psychology and that I've had my personal issues as well, is one of the things that helps me to be good with my clients. I have a lot of compassion for the different issues that people have," Roes said. "Maybe it's not a conscious thing, but it seems like the emotional issues come up a fair amount of the time."

While Roes speculates that her own experiences and her openness about them create rapport with clients and may contribute to the type of clients she attracts, empathy isn't her only specialty.

Finding a fit, for instance, "is key," she said. Consequently, one of her services is accompanying her clients to an alterations expert who tailors their clothes so they look custom made.

"I help clients to alter what they have already to make it work better for them. Or in some cases, I help them to alter the new things," she said.

Altering one's existing clothes rather than buying new ones also saves money, and, since many clients are on a budget, keeping the process affordable is important.

"I do a lot of resale shopping," Roes said. "We gear where we shop based on how much clients need. If they don't need a lot, then maybe we go to the mall and just get a couple of things [so] it's not going to cost a lot. But if they need a lot of pieces, then often we'll go to resale stores, where we can get more."

One client she worked with recently, for example, was able to buy 22 items, several of them designer pieces, for under \$300.

“I don’t know what the 22 items would have cost full price, but I’m certain I saved at least \$500, even factoring in [Roes’] time,” the client, who requested anonymity, said.

There’s a lot of prep work both Roes and her clients need to do before a successful shopping expedition can take place, including a questionnaire about lifestyle, values, objectives, color and style preferences, and personality.

“Before visiting clients’ closets, I ask for five adjectives that describe their current style and five that describe their desired style. Then, we begin our time together by spending about 15 minutes discussing their objectives,” Roes said.

Determining clients’ needs in this way, before starting to shop, makes selecting items once in the store more efficient and effective. However, it’s also time consuming, which is why Roes has decided to add virtual consulting to her repertoire.

“[Virtual consulting] takes more prep work on the clients’ part, but it costs less,” she said. In virtual consultations, clients do the up-front work themselves, taking photos of their existing clothes and sending them to Roes, who suggests different combinations, color choices, accents, additions or alterations, and directs them to where they can buy complementary pieces.

The venture is just one of several that she foresees implementing, along with writing e-books about a variety of style-related topics, creating a membership-based online community with videos, webinars and client forums, partnering with local businesses to provide workshops, conducting group sessions, and consulting at swap parties.

“I’m good at seeing the possibilities,” she said, laughing.

Indeed, it seems possibility is largely what styling one’s wardrobe is all about.

“There are no hard and fast rules,” Roes said. Nothing is fixed, so there’s no need to worry about wearing white after Labor Day or matching shoes and bags. While fashion pundits tend to make cut-and-dried pronouncements about what people need in their closets, clothing choice is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, Roes said. It’s “an organic process,” one that’s particular to the changing circumstances of every individual’s life.

It was Austrian-American psychologist Ernest Dichter who first made the analogy between our closets and our lives. As Dichter put it, “Each time the door is opened, all [our] possessions, past and present, fall out.” Perhaps, if Dichter had hired a stylist, he would have added that it’s possible to turn such disarray to design.

Business owner: Debbie Roes

Business type: Wardrobe styling

Years in business: One

Services: In-person and virtual styling, wardrobe audits, gift certificates

Market niche: Often works with clients experiencing life transitions and/or personal issues

Business philosophy: Unleashing possibility and working with what you have

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