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SMALL BUSINESS

For Rent: Aides, Wingmen, Husbands

Service providers run errands and do odd jobs for the not so rich and famous.

By Cynthia H. Cho
Times Staff Writer

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June Saruwatari is so organized that she has made a business of it. The owner of Organizing Maniac clocks 12-to-16-hour days helping other people eliminate clutter, set up filing systems and learn to manage their time.

But even the tidier-than-thou have their limits.

Saruwatari didn't have time the other day to hang around her Los Feliz home waiting for a repairman. So she summoned Gofer Girls, a Los Angeles company that does errands for \$30 an hour.

"I run a business," Saruwatari said. "I value my time."

The rich and famous have long understood the value of hiring people to handle their chores. They call them servants or, in Hollywood, personal assistants. But now regular people are doing the math and increasingly are outsourcing life's tedious tasks to an army of small businesses.

Need someone to drive your pet around town? There's the pet chauffeur service that promises to lug Fifi to the vet or the airport.

Need help working through the honey-do list around the house? Rent a husband. For a small fee, he can rearrange the living room furniture or clean out the rain gutters. And you don't have to worry about fighting him for the remote.

Some people are so lacking in time or social skills that they can't find their own dates for a night on the town. A "female wingman" is ready to come to the rescue.

Long workdays and two-career couples have created a market for all sorts of service providers. The assistance business is becoming so common that Working Mother magazine's September issue printed a tip sheet for moms seeking professional errand help.

Using companies such as Gofer Girls can be an efficient use of talent and time, academics say.

It's the classic Economics 101 example of opportunity cost: Michael Jordan can probably mow his

lawn faster than anyone else, but is doing so the best use of his time? (You answered correctly if you selected: No, he should hire someone to mow so that he could do something else, such as film a Hanes underwear commercial.)

Lisa Ristorucci came up with the idea for Gofer Girls when she was an English literature major at UCLA. She worked summers in medical offices booking appointments, dealing with patients — and picking up the doctors' dry cleaning.

"That was where the seed was planted," Ristorucci said. "I saw how busy professionals are." Retrieving dry cleaning is one of Gofer Girls' most-requested services, along with shopping for groceries and picking up goods at department stores.

Hollywood resident Pamela Rich got hooked during a bout of poor health. The 39-year-old Realtor hired Gofer Girls to pick up some food and medicine.

But Rich, who puts in 10 hours a day during the week and often works weekends, found herself calling Gofer Girls again and again to drop off shoes for repair, deliver gifts and run assorted errands.

"I'm a busy single girl, so I first started by asking Lisa to get me cases of water and things like that," Rich said. "And then she started sitting some open houses. From there, it's kind of a decadent thing, but I got used to it."

Susan George's Marina del Rey-based company, Pet Taxi, shuffles animals wherever their owners want them to go, including veterinarian offices, dog parks or grooming salons.

Most trips within Los Angeles County start at \$55 an hour. A chauffeur can wait for a pet outside a vet's office or bring a pet to the airport and send it away (about \$95 for Los Angeles International Airport). Pet Taxi also whisks pets to owners who are on vacation.

George, 57, said her company made nine to 15 trips daily. Although she wouldn't disclose financial information, she said Pet Taxi had been more successful than she thought it would be when she bought it seven years ago.

"It's been paying the mortgage ever since," the Marina del Rey resident said, adding that the job has it ups (going to movie stars' homes) and downs (picking up sick pets and consoling the owners).

John de Graaf, editor of a collection of essays titled "Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America," is disturbed by the upswing in such services.

"I don't think this is a good idea," said De Graaf, a Seattle television producer of the PBS specials "Running Out of Time" and "Affluenza." "We will be much better rounded and happier people if we work less and grow some of our own food, cook some of our own food, learn to do things ourselves."

Kaile Warren believes that people these days don't have the "time, tools or talent" to do some things for themselves. In 1996, he founded Rent-A-Husband with those people in mind.

"People used to be do-it-yourself homeowners," he said. "But now, they're do-it-for-me homeowners."

The South Portland, Maine-based company's selling point is that one of its employees — the "husband" — will be "the perfect part-time partner for those jobs that never get done" around the house. That includes simple jobs such as moving furniture or more labor-intensive tasks such as repairing a roof at a cost of about \$50 to \$100 an hour. Warren said Rent-A-Husband's annual sales amounted to "several million dollars."

The company has 14 franchises in seven states, mainly in the Northeast, but will enter California this month, operating out of Ace Hardware Corp. stores near Huntington Beach and Oakland.

Michael Chau's plunge into the service industry two years ago began with a leisure-time observation. Whenever the San Francisco resident would hang out with the guys, they'd ask Chau to bring his wife, Sarah, who would talk to other women at bars and clubs and then introduce them to Chau's buddies.

Watching those interactions, Chau thought, "Hey, this is something."

That something became Lady Wingmen, the Gainesville, Fla.-based company Chau co-founded in 2004 with a Florida business partner.

In the military world, a wingman is a pilot who backs up another during a dangerous mission. In the dating world, a wingman typically is a male friend who will help a guy pick up women — a sidekick who will help break the ice, sing his friend's praises and talk to the target woman's friends.

Chau's innovation was to pair men with women who provide dating tips and, more important, introduce them to other women at bars, clubs and other social functions. Lady Wingmen operates in Los Angeles and eight other cities.

Chau said his main selling point was this: Women can easily bond with other women — say, while waiting in line for the bathroom. So wouldn't they make better wingmen? Also, a woman is more likely to trust another woman whereas a man might simply be brushed off.

On a normal weekend, Chau said, there are five to 10 Lady Wingmen at work nationwide, including three California cities (Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose). The service costs \$50 an hour.

Chau described his L.A. employees as attractive and "knowing the club scene," important skills in a town like this. He said the Los Angeles market was different from the others. Most of the men who sign up to use the service are new to the city and are looking to have a good time at the city's hottest spots.

"At other cities, people are looking for love," Chau said. "They want to find someone special, maybe they are lonely. In L.A., it's 'I want to be a party person. I want to go out and have a lot of fun.' "

Gofer Girls founder Ristorucci has dreams for her errand empire.

Although Gofer Girls hasn't advertised much since its March 2005 birth, demand has been growing, the 32-year-old entrepreneur said.

Ristorucci once was the lone Gofer Girl, and she had to take a part-time job to make ends meet. Now, she runs her company full time, overseeing five employees and more than 50 regular clients.

Other signs that her business is expanding: She recently hired an attorney and an accountant.

She hopes to one day have a fleet of cars — a la Best Buy Co.'s Geek Squad — and uniforms for her employees.

And she has created a company slogan: "We run your errands ... so you don't run out of time."

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