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Web site's founders offer style mavens to the masses

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If you think you know the difference between turquoise and sapphire, you don't know the half of it. Unless you are the sort who keeps a Pantone color chart in your dressing room -- indeed, unless you are the sort who has even heard of fashion's favorite color-consulting firm -- chances are pretty good that you have not given much thought to the way these two shades of blue offset shades of red.

This matters because if you have a ruddy complexion, a sapphire shirt might be just the thing to tamp down the excessive pink in your cheeks. But if your skin has yellow undertones -- and you know what undertones are, right? -- then turquoise could be a bad choice because it could make you appear sallow, even jaundiced.

These may sound like trivial matters in the grand scheme of life. But in our mundane, day-to-day lives, when we are not thinking existential thoughts but just trying to make a good impression during, say, a business meeting, this sort of information can come in handy.

But alas, it's not the kind of knowledge that one acquires in high school or college. It isn't laid out in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*, where readers are given the scoop on the seasonal trends and then sent forth to incorporate them into their wardrobe like fashion savants. Stylists -- those mysterious architects of dazzling red-carpet moments -- are the keepers of such secrets.

But how do mere mortals find these talented wizards?

[Style for Hire](#) is a new online agency aiming to give the masses access to master mythmakers. Washington is the launching pad, the company's test market.

When the agency's Web site goes live Sept. 13, customers will be able to search a database of company-approved stylists in the D.C. area. The site's founders, Stacy London of [TLC's "What Not to Wear"](#) -- the one with the gray streak in her raven hair -- and former fashion industry executive Cindy McLaughlin, are doing the training and vetting.



Thus it was that one weekend in July, two dozen men and women, vying for positions as stylists with the new venture, gathered in a black box of a room at Georgetown's House of Sweden. Pantone colors were scrupulously dissected topics of conversation, along with foundation garments, proportions and a complicated formula for calculating "cost per wear" that involved enough algebra and opacity to make the Government Accountability Office proud.

"In a very subjective field, we're trying to come up with an objective system," McLaughlin, 40, says. Yet how do you objectively quantify a good eye and a way with people? For safety's sake, Style for Hire will offer customers a 30-day money-back guarantee.

A stylist's skill lies in knowing whether a client should wear an A-line skirt or a pencil version. They elevate mundane ensembles with just the right necklace or belt. They are visual storytellers, concerned hyperbolists for whom an ill-fitting garment is disastrous and a particularly flattering one is quite literally breathtaking. "I die!" celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe regularly moans on her [Bravo reality show](#) whenever she spies a stunning frock.

Stylists are able to conjure a fashion icon out of a lanky 20-something starlet. . . or a 40-something first lady with a nice set of biceps. They don't merely help you shop; they don't just tell you what to wear. The best of them help you construct a dazzling, but convincingly authentic, personality out of clothes.

In her training, London eschewed the tough love she embraces on "What Not to Wear." The company's stylists will not thrust their clients into a 360-degree mirrored room and force them to face their sins of drawstring trousers and shoulder-pad-infested camp shirts. London doesn't believe in the Hollywood approach either, in which clients sometimes end up looking like clones of their fashion gurus, bedecked in Halston-era jumpsuits and tunics with fake tans and highlighted hair. The D.C. experts must "be part cheerleader, part clinician and part psychologist. You're treading into dangerous territory because appearance is so bound up in self-esteem," London, 41, says.

But make no mistake, London adds, the goal is to polish customers, not coddle them: "Aside from all that mushy-gushy stuff, women don't know how to dress!"

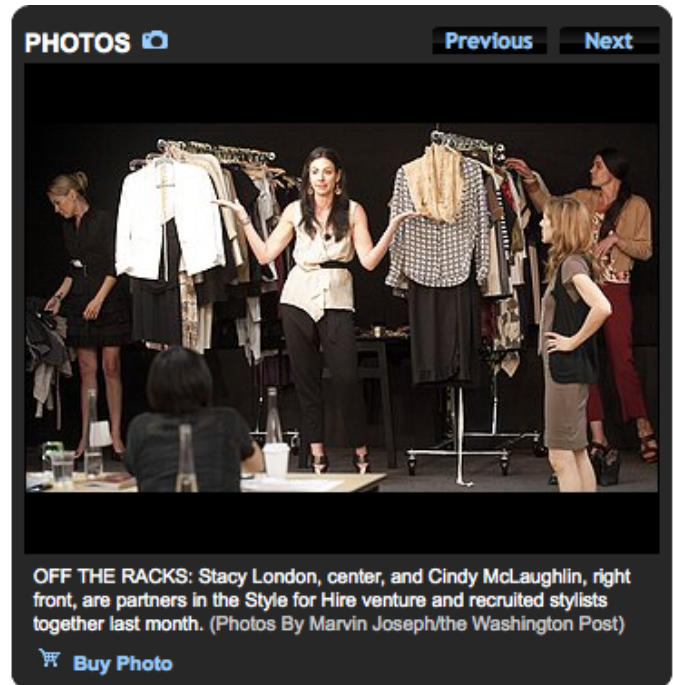
Diplomacy goes with the job. Stylist Paula O'Neil has had clients who've asked her to gently counsel their 13-year-old daughters. "They want me to take their daughters out to teach them at an early age to express themselves, while still learning to be appropriate," she says.

A lot of teens, O'Neil says, "are dressing to be ignored. They just want to get through school. And those who want to be seen are being seen for the wrong reasons."

The same could be said about adults.

Stylists, one should know, are not always particularly well-attired. London and McLaughlin are a fashionable duo, but the red carpet doyenne Jessica Paster was sometimes so publicly disheveled she could have been mistaken for a bag lady -- and not a Comme des Garçons, artfully ravaged one. And many of today's top experts are more likely to wear practical jeans rather than Balmain or Pucci. The point is never to compete with the client.

The crew that assembled in Georgetown wore a mix of low-key jersey dresses and nosebleed heels, perfectly fitting jeans as well as black and white basics with the whiff of Eileen Fisher about them -- and no, that's not good. Some of the folks were confident longtime professionals such as Kara Allan, who has been in the business for eight years. Others were amateurs who have been giving their friends fashion advice, such as the guy in white jeans and brown suede loafers who works for the Homeland Security Department and declined to give his name, for fear of getting an earful of mocking commentary from colleagues who wear their dowdiness like a badge of brilliance. (Leave this stylish gent alone, would you?)



A three-ring binder provided them with a few key statistics about the average woman's size. (Some of the stylists will work with men, but the focus of the training was on women.) Average height: 5-foot-4. Average weight: 163 pounds. Percentage of women with a classic hourglass figure: 8.

London, the company's New York-based stylist-in-chief, coached them on how to interview a new client to coax out information about their style without insulting them. No judgments! They talked money -- as in "What's your shopping budget?" Most of the stylists admit they never ask this question directly but rather play coy: Where do you like to shop? Wal-Mart or Bloomingdale's? Barneys New York or Macy's?

According to London: "No budget is too small. If a customer has \$100, we will stretch it as far as possible." But truth be told, 100 bucks doesn't go far. Consider: Allan recently traveled to Miami to help a woman update her wardrobe. That customer spent \$20,000. But Allan swears she looked really, really, really good.

The final challenge for the weekend required the stylists to show their skills by assembling looks for specific events. And then explaining their reasoning. They were not allowed to say, "Because it looks good."

McLaughlin, a slender brunette with sharp features, brought in her wardrobe for diagnosis, offering herself as the fashion-challenged patient. A couple of garments seemed tossed into the mix purely to see if any stylist would be daring enough -- or fool enough -- to use them. A horizontally striped beige and moss-colored knit tunic. That's a challenge.

One stylist took the bait. For a child's afternoon birthday party, she pairs the striped sweater with wide-legged khaki pants. The resulting ensemble resembles a large, striped tent. London is horrified by this lapse in judgment. "Never pair those pants with volume," she says sternly. "You should know that."

In this hypothetical fashion emergency, the stylist killed the patient.

Another test: Dress McLaughlin for a formal business event in the winter.

A trainee matches a forest-green knit dress with brown boots. No, no, absolutely no. Not formal enough, London says.

Look three: a parent-teacher conference. The stylist has a question: Is it for a D.C. public school or Sidwell Friends? Are we parsing things a little too finely here? Not at all -- this is fashion diagnostics at its best.

What happens if a client says she doesn't think two garments go together?

"Never argue with a client on the basis of taste alone. It immediately puts the stylist on the 'I'm better than you' path. Argue on the technical," London says. "Try to be constructively critical, which means offering an alternative." Which might mean saying something closer to: the pleated skirt has too much volume and makes you look wider on the bottom than you really are. An A-line skirt would give you a similar effect without the excessive fabric. Don't say: The pleated skirt just doesn't work on you. Or worse: The pleated skirt makes you look like a moose.

"It's about respect for the client," London says. "It should never be that you're telling your client what to wear."

Why launch Style for Hire in the nation's capital, a place not known for indulging in fashion fantasies? The decision was based on convenience as well as a recognition of this town's complicated relationship with style.

McLaughlin, who serves as CEO of Style for Hire, and who handles the daily operations, lives in Washington. She came here a little over a year ago when her husband, Andrew, took a job at the White House in technology policy. "I am [like] the customer in this equation," McLaughlin says of her relationship with chief stylist London, whom she has known for six years. "Styling does not come easily to me."

The two women saw the capital as fertile ground because the area is chockablock with people who have more money than time. It's populated by sophisticates who have limited local access to such services. And while the area has a reputation for being unconcerned with fashion, its political swells are also known for being obsessed with appearances.

"I suspect for so many people, getting styled is as much about being fashionable as being functional, as much about value as it is to look like the cover of a magazine," McLaughlin says.

The company logistics will be fairly straightforward. Style for Hire will take an agency fee for each booking and receive a share of the profits from retailers -- including Sylene, Piazza Sempione, Urban Chic, Talbots and Denim Bar -- that have agreed to offer discounts to Style for Hire customers. Stylists also pay a fee for training. That two-day Georgetown session, for example, cost \$2,000.

Afterwards, 11 participants were invited to join the site as stylists, Allan and O'Neil among them. Six were welcomed as apprentices, including Mr. Homeland Security. The rest? Buh-bye. They did not get a refund. But they left having been schooled on the visual impact and wardrobe significance of various shades of blue.

