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Sort out your wardrobe

A fashion consultant teaches high-flying women how to buy pieces that suit the 'real you'.

Words Kirsty Munro

YOU'VE recovered from the New Year sales, have resolved to burn off the Christmas kilos and soon the new season's fashions will be in stores. There's just one problem. As you stand in front of a wardrobe bulging with clothes, you utter the plaintive cry, "I have nothing to wear!"

While resolutions to go to the gym, learn Mandarin and master the trombone may have fallen by the wayside already, mastering your own wardrobe takes just one afternoon. The result? Next Monday, you'll feel confident that you have a week's worth of great outfits and you'll be ready to buy new winter clothes without breaking the bank.

The Sydney wardrobe consultant Chata Romano understands the dilemma. Known to her clients as the Fashion Doctor, she has been dressing women and conquering closet chaos for more than 20 years. Her advice is that women should stop comparing themselves to models and actresses, and get to know their real selves. She finds when she visits clients that most wear only about 20 per cent of their clothes, leaving the rest to take up space.

"Why did you purchase that item in the first place? To wear it," Romano says. "There are women who can plan a takeover of a rival company or a fabulous 40th birthday bash for 150 people with their eyes closed but whose basic tools seem to be missing when it comes to planning their wardrobes."



Her advice is disarmingly simple. Before you scoop up those last sale remnants or buy a dozen new winter trends that won't suit you, take stock of your life. Romano offers five simple pointers:

Analyse your lifestyle

What do you do Monday to Friday and on weekends? "If you wear corporate clothes every weekday, then most of your wardrobe should consist of suits and smart pieces, and a smaller part should be casual, weekend wear," Romano says. The key is to answer the question honestly – describe your real lifestyle, not your fantasy life. How many of us have a casual lifestyle, yet hoard lavish party frocks "just in case"? Once you know how much of your life is spent dressing a certain way, you'll immediately see if your wardrobe matches your lifestyle. Romano says the reason that 80 per cent of clothes languish unworn is because they don't fit your real lifestyle. Let the culling begin.

How do you see yourself?

And how would you like the world to see you? "I suggest my clients think of adjectives to describe themselves. It's no good giving someone a dramatic makeover that is at odds with her personality," Romano says. If that is difficult, ask a trusted friend to describe you impartially. It's also important to think how you would like others to see you. "Elegant, refined and chic... suggests a classic look, like Audrey Hepburn. If it's sexy, naughty, flirty, then a different look comes up," she says. There are also different definitions for different occasions and different times of life.

What is your body shape?

Romano disagrees with fashion pundits who categorise women by a simple set of shapes. Instead, she looks at the body from the neck to the ankles, in terms of what you want to emphasise and what you'd rather disguise. That includes stomach, arms, hips and even knees. "I do a lot of work to disguise my knees," Romano says. Once you know what flatters your body shape, don't buy anything that doesn't work with it.

What colours suit you?

Romano believes we all fall into one of four skin tones – soft, medium, deep or rich – and you can wear warm or cool colours, varying the intensity according to your skin tone.

What is fashionable this season?

Think about that, then work out what would fit into your lifestyle and what works with your own body shape. "You also need to think, 'can I carry it off?'" Romano says. There's no use wearing something that makes you feel uncomfortable, even if you have the figure for it. It comes back to the adjectives to describe yourself. Now that you know who you are, here's how to tackle your wardrobe:



Refined... Chata Romano (left). Top right: spend on the basics (above) and skimp on the trends (below). Photos: Getty Images, Simon Schluter

Cut it down

Make the culling process into a party: turn up the music and get the advice of a friend whose taste you trust. Try on everything and try different combinations. When you find a new combination you love, take a picture of it. Be ruthless about anything you haven't worn in more than a year. Make a pile for charity, resale, repair and the bin. If it's too hard to get rid of something now, put it away in another room. If you haven't retrieved it in the next six months, throw it out.

When you're ready to put back the keepers, put jackets with jackets, skirts with skirts and so on – even separating suit pieces – so you can immediately



money on a great pair of jeans (most of us look best in a slightly bootcut style, not the tight drainpipes of last year), a white cotton shirt (you want a great fit over the bust that doesn't swamp your waist - don't be afraid of getting it altered by a tailor), black trousers that make you feel fabulous (a little bit of stretch is a good thing), a solid colour skirt that suits your figure and a great jacket that you'll wear with everything.

Skimp on the trends

Then you can spend less on the occasional trendy piece that will spice up what you've got. Last summer's leggings are a good example: they instantly transformed skirts and sundresses into new outfits. Don't fall in love with a print unless the silhouette suits you, too. It's too easy to buy pieces just for the gorgeous colour or pattern and find they don't suit your shape.

Smart accessories

Clever women stick to a fairly basic wardrobe that suits them perfectly, then dress up or down with accessories. There's no need to buy a whole new wardrobe this winter; just a few key pieces - a chunky knit in soft grey or pewter, a satin shirt and a pair of high-waisted trousers would do - then add accessories to lift your basics. Gloves have gone from useful necessity to fashion piece this winter - try gauntlets if you're bold, or opt for a short style in rich black leather to show off your wrist bones. Patent leather adds drama - a pair of shoes or a wide belt would do (any more and you'll look like a dominatrix).

Chata Romano's book, Change Your Image, Change Your Life, is available through her website, www.chataromano.com.

see new combinations of tops and bottoms. Every piece you buy should go with at least two or three other garments. *InStyle Instant Style* (In Style Books, \$65) has pages of mix-and-match outfits. If you get wardrobe amnesia when you shop, take a few photos of your wardrobe and keep them in your wallet.

Spend on the basics

Every wardrobe needs solid foundations - these are your classic pieces that make you feel fabulous and suit most situations. They're also the hardest to find. Spend more time and

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