

# Merchant Princess

**By Merle Ginsberg**

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Is there anything more personal than shopping?

No activity short of marriage brings up such questions of self-image, self-esteem, self-scrutiny -- and self-involvement. Shopping pits fantasy and escapism ("If he sees me in this, he won't be able to resist!") against cold reality ("If I buy this, I can't pay my rent").

Didn't your mother ever warn you, "Beware of whom you shop with"? No, mine didn't either. I shopped with her -- and found out the hard way. Then I shopped with my sister. She told me I looked awful in everything. Next I tried shopping with my fiancé. Needless to say, I never got married. Single once again, I shopped with rich pals -- and nearly went broke.

Which is why, at a luxury institution like Neiman Marcus Beverly Hills, the job of personal shopper requires a skill set that is more likely found in a movie star who became a studio chief who started out as a shrink. It requires great acting, enthusiasm, a boundless love of fashion and a deep understanding of what women want -- not to mention empathy and flamboyance and no small amount of showmanship.

Enter BoBo.

At 5 foot 5 and a size 2, with trademark striped, spiked hair, voluptuous coral lips, Sharpie-outlined eyes, oversize leather jackets, big necklaces and scarves draped over black pants, BoBo Choi is definitely the more flamboyant of Neiman Marcus's two top personal shoppers, placing her at the highest rung of retail. With a clientele of Beverly Hills ladies who shop at lunch, female studio executives, movie stars, managers, bored housewives and gay divorcées out for retail-therapy revenge, she probably makes more than most agents.

BoBo toiled in lingerie initially, for two years. "But I get so bored there," she confesses, "and those little hangers always snap in my eye!" She ascended the corporate escalator 13 years ago and has been climbing ever since. Her counterpart (and some would say competitor), Catherine Bloom, a prim Neiman's institution for 20 years, may have a similar clientele, but they look wildly different. At a Zac Posen trunk show in the fall, it is easy to spot who belongs to whom: Catherine's ladies are in black suits and little bobs, their wealth betrayed by a studied lack of ostentation and very thin thighs. In BoBo's crowd are a 60-year-old woman in a beret and go-go boots; a 50-ish blonde swathed in Belgian blackness, harlequin glasses and a blue manicure; and the heavysset wife of an older rock star, in an acid green Dior biker jacket. "From BoBo!" she squeals.

BoBo declares proudly, "She and I have same taste!"

Heading for her suite of dressing rooms conveniently located off Gucci, BoBo is trailed by an entourage of women: "Wherever I go, it's 'BoBo this,' 'BoBo that.' I think it my name. People like to say it." Even in her native Korea, the name BoBo -- which sounds like a tapioca tea drink -- is a rarity. "Nothing about BoBo is usual," she agrees. "I am one and only." Including the way she often refers to herself in the third person, a character in her own script.

Notes the goth-clad customer, "Any more character, and she'd be fictional."

There are lots of definitions for "personal shopper," but Neiman Marcus's is fairly specific. It's a retail star -- a prima-fashionista, if you will -- who gets her own space (in BoBo's case, the square footage of a Manhattan two-bedroom), an assistant and the run of the store, which is literally true, as BoBo runs from floor to floor, plucking whatever items suit her clients' fancies, then swooshing them back to her private quarters, where clients can lunch on salads and talk on their cell phones to their hearts' content. It's the maximum shopping experience -- along with getting the BoBo eye.

"About five years ago," explains Allen Barber, Neiman's merchandise manager and BoBo's boss, "the store started to become more separates driven, less about one designer look. Most salespeople know their particular lines. BoBo knows more about all the merchandise than anyone else. We have learned that a lot of our customers aren't more regular because they haven't established a personal relationship with a salesperson. But if you're like Catherine and BoBo, you establish long-term relationships. It's what Neiman terms 'relationship management.'"

BoBo's office is chockablock with racks; photos of her with fashion folk like Roberto Cavalli; boxes of Godiva chocolate; and Post-its that read, "Transfer Gucci suit." Her answering machine is never silent -- right now a Saudi princess calls in an order. Annie Shim, BoBo's slim young assistant, picks up. "Little Girl totally on top of it," BoBo says approvingly. "I give everyone nickname."

Annie says: "The whole store calls me Little Girl now. That's the only name clients know me by."

It's the day after the Posen show, and BoBo -- in a Richard Tyler leather jacket, Michael Kors turtleneck, black pants with a beaded shawl wrapped over them, yesterday's coral necklace worn as a belt, and a big turquoise necklace -- has on her Clergerie sportifs: "I gotta move. Have 5,000 pair of Manolo Blahnik shoes but cannot wear here. Even in flats, I elevate feet when I go home."

Home is a two-bedroom condo in Brentwood that she describes only as "almost paid for" -- in the same area as her wealthier clients. She drives a black Mercedes-Benz. And no, she can't tell me what her salary and commission are; that's Neiman's rule. "And I love, love, love my job," she says. "Mr. Martens" -- John Martens, the general manager -- "is world's best boss. Just say, I do fine." An educated guess would have her taking home \$250,000 to \$400,000 a year. Or more.

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But there's a never-ending list of things to do and people to do them for. "I send things out on loan to client. A lot of client don't come in. I know what they like. I have movie-star client, size 2. I spend hours to pick out for her. I send on loan -- she buy half."

She also keeps track of merchandise in 30-odd stores. "If we don't have size, I find size -- somewhere. Finding size is like getting college degree! Ask Little Girl! We very good on follow-up. I get up every middle of the night and make note to call somebody. Because of my client, I'm here. I'm grateful. I do everything from my heart -- I from old-fashioned country. When I call Dallas

office, I go out of way to serve client. I say, 'Don't say no to me.' And I dress my client different every season. You can't tell client to buy everything. One season, Armani; next season, YSL pant. I help them build wardrobe."

BoBo was born in Seoul, and at 3 began clipping fashion photos. As a teenager, traversing the streets in microminis, she was recruited into the Miss Korea pageant. "I wanted to be most famous fashion model in world," she laughs. "I got interested in clothes, so came to L.A. when I was 18. Thought I was gonna be somebody. Walked on Rodeo Drive in swap-meet clothes, and all these rich people say to me, 'Where you get it?'"

BoBo's lack of pretense works for her. "I'm very serious person. Every day I get up, I say, 'Today great day!' Was in bad mood for year when husband wipe me out with no warning, furniture, money, everything. I became better person after that. Today my motto is, 'I'm perfect.' What's not to be happy? I tell my client: 'You are beautiful. You healthy. Don't complain. Life too short.'"

On the night of the first fall markdown, when special clients shop at 30 percent off for one night only, she moves from a movie star's wife to a doctor's wife with plastic surgery tape still on her eyes to me, living on a reporter's income, as if we all had the same spending potential. When I, in my sale-aholic frenzy, pull a Lacroix dress, Marni peacoat, Dolce & Gabbana dress and YSL jacket, she makes me try them all on and says: "That Dolce dress made for you. You wear that for boyfriend and turn him on. Put rest back. You need to buy apartment." Of course, she's right.

A few weeks before Christmas -- deep into the fall sales and resort previews -- half of Neiman looks as if it's gone Lilly Pulitzer, a sea of pinks and greens and yellows. But it's the dark woolen half that's overpopulated with women armed

with seven pairs of trousers heading for the dressing room, determined to get their size-10 tushies into 60-off size-6 pants.

BoBo's hair has gone wintry. In place of the orange stripes are burgundy ones. Some in little braids. "And I get some extension." She could be anywhere from 28 to 45, and of course she's not saying. This is Beverly Hills, after all. "Let say this," she says. "BoBo not young. BoBo not old. BoBo perfect!"

Her office is now overflowing with Cristal and Godiva. It's nowhere near present-exchanging time, but her zealous clients can't wait -- they want those spring pieces before their friends get them. Most of them will be going to the same awards shows or black-tie charity dinners.

"There are dozens of fashion emergencies during awards season!" she says. "I have to be careful. Same group of ladies want same Badgley Mischka. I cannot sell them. I mix and match. Never repeat. If they wear same dress as friend, they hate BoBo."

Lots of BoBo's clients are regulars -- married or well-divorced women who come in two or three times a week. Shopping is their vocation. Today, a favorite is coming in -- Mrs. X, a Brentwood widow in her 40's whose husband had managed a famous rock band. Blond, slim and with a number of boyfriends -- one married -- she is with Mrs. Y, another Bobo client, pregnant, blond, divorced and now having a child with her much younger actor boyfriend.

Mrs. X has come to pick up a Carolina Herrera gown that BoBo tracked down for her. She is wearing a suede coat by Henry Béguelin that BoBo found, reduced from \$2,000 to an irresistible \$400. Little Girl pops in with cappuccinos and salads. As they eat, BoBo has gone out to find them more markdowns, while Mrs. X calls her married boyfriend. "Darling," she coos, "there's a Carolina Herrera gown over here you need to buy me."

Mrs. Y wants to get her boyfriend a suit in the men's department on 4, so after lunch, we go up. But Mrs. Y is not quite sure of her boyfriend's size, so BoBo grabs a Paul Smith jacket and heads for the first good-looking man she can find and asks him to slip it on. "Take your shirt off, too!" BoBo teases, and when he offers to doff his pants, the ladies have a fit of giggles -- and Mrs. Y buys the suit.

"The whole BoBo experience is about fun, fun, fun," laughs Mrs. X. "She had a party for her best clients a couple of months ago. She matched my Gucci dress with Manolo tiger-print boots. Then she went through the closet and found a tiger-print scarf I didn't know I had -- and tied it around my knee! I got compliments all night! Who would think of that? BoBo has changed my life!"

Adds Mrs. Y with a laugh: "And jump-started the economy in her own inimitable way. Somebody should tell George Bush to put BoBo in the cabinet. She'd be his secret weapon!"

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