

Enterprise Smart Money

Enterprising women

When nothing is just a chore



Anne Fulwood

If the runaway success of the television series *Downton Abbey* is any indication, perhaps there is a little bit of the Earl and Countess of Grantham in us all.

Abbie Allen foresaw that a yearning for easier and efficient domestic management had the potential to sustain a private concierge business, and so founded Lifestyle Elements. She says it is a "modern response to the dilemma of not having enough time in the day" – or perhaps the modern equivalent of hot- and cold-running staff.

She "runs errands" for clients from collecting their dry cleaning to pet care and house-sitting. The most popular service has been arranging quotes, times and access for trades people – a well-known source of frustration for many home owners.

A country girl brought up on the family farm in South Australia, Allen did occasional babysitting to earn spending money. While doing a bachelor of management, majoring in marketing, at the University of South Australia she worked as a nanny for one family, which evolved into managing their household, organising chores such as carpet cleaning and grocery shopping.

Contemporaries of her client wistfully remarked they could use a similar service, which motivated Allen to get started. "I had no idea there was such a thing as the personal concierge industry. It was just an idea I had."

She says there was only one other concierge service in Adelaide when she began. Apart from the challenge of establishing a business, she had to build public awareness that such a service actually existed.

Allen decided to market in two ways. First, she printed about 1000 handbills and did a letterbox drop, helped by her husband and mother. Second, she attended networking events in Adelaide, joining Toastmasters International to learn public speaking and then spruiking Lifestyle Elements at every opportunity.

She picked up about five clients in the first year, rising to about 60 on her books by the end of last year.

Twenty-five of these require consistent services while the rest are "as needed". Most are professionals in their 40s and 50s, with children and "lots going on".

About 65 per cent of her clients have been with her at least four years. One of her very first clients remains to this day – a woman for whom Allen's team does the weekly grocery shopping plus co-ordinating cleaning and tradespeople.

Her oldest client is in his 90s, and Allen says most live in the dress-circle suburbs around Adelaide. For services beyond 10 kilometres from the CBD, Allen negotiates a fee beyond her \$75-an-hour base rate.

Allen turned over about \$100,000 for the financial year to June 2012, a consistent figure, she says, for the past five years.

In the first couple of years, Allen says she worked part-time for a human resources company to derive more income until Lifestyle Elements could pay her a salary.

"It was a great way to start my business and because I was upfront about it, my employer was very understanding."

Aged just 23 when she launched, Allen admits pricing her services was



Abbie Allen, with tablet in hand, shopping for a client.

Photo David Mariuz

another challenge. "I had to pull a price out of the air. There was no pricing template for the services I was offering."

She started at \$30 an hour but now charges \$75, depending on the services. "I was told I should charge more but it was daunting – I was amazed when I started that people would pay \$30."

Clients can choose packages of 10-, 20- or 50-hour blocks to be used over 12 months, but says Allen: "They are often used within the first six months." She offers a two-hour trial package for new clients, after which

they can buy the packages or pay by the hour. All banking is done online and Allen requires money on deposit, from which she pays their bills.

Allen says her website was an imperative as a marketing tool. She built it herself using WordPress and updates it regularly: "It is a timesaver and a moneysaver. It is also the immediacy – I can blog and adjust things very quickly to offer a new package or a new special."

It is not, however, the dominant driver of business. Allen says about 50 per cent of new leads come from the website, the rest via word of

I had no idea there was such a thing as the personal concierge industry.

mouth. Thereafter, nearly 75 per cent of the word-of-mouth inquiries convert to business, compared with only half the online inquiries.

Allen's husband, Tim, has worked with Lifestyle Elements for the past two years and together they manage the business from their home, work on different days and share childcare for their two-year-old daughter. They lease two cars and the biggest expense beyond staff is their insurance covering public liability, professional indemnity and vehicles at an annual cost of around \$5000.

Occasionally Allen calls in casual staff, paying them about \$25 an hour plus petrol. Her busiest times are during holidays and long weekends and she is about to start a marketing campaign for Easter.

A one-woman marketing machine, Allen credits Toastmasters – she has been a member for 10 years – with helping her develop the confidence to "walk the talk". She now has connections with the US-based International Concierge and Lifestyle Management Association and is among the founding members of the newly formed Australasian association the Institute of Concierge and Lifestyle Managers, brought together by three women in Brisbane. Allen will be a guest speaker at their second annual conference this June. "Our biggest focus as a business is to educate people that this service exists and how they can use us," she says.

While Allen has a certification as a concierge specialist from the international group, she says no licences are necessary in Australia to do this work. "I just look for people who take the initiative and have good attention to detail."

And, of course, who can keep their mouths shut. Her most unusual task has been to buy and deliver chocolates and flowers on behalf of a secret admirer. All part of the service.