

In their many missions as Charlie's Shopping Angels, our heroines have been on the front line of the retail battlefield. Here they share their exclusive tips for coming out on top in the Store Wars . . .

*Grazia's Guide to Low-Cost Luxury:
must-haves of modern life and where to find them*

Dear Reader,

I have lived in wealth and in poverty, and please believe me, wealth is better. But even in hard times it is possible to enjoy treats that raise the spirits and gladden the soul. Some of these are secrets I have not shared with my closest friends . . . keep them to yourself, please. Luxury becomes tainted when shared with the masses.

The right brands carry a cachet, of course, but the trick is to know when to splurge and when to scrimp. I would prefer one bottle of Dom Perignon every few months, to organic carrots every week. Carrots so expensive they are no doubt put to bed at night in their own individual fleece sleeping bags and lulled to sleep with lullabies! If I cannot taste the difference, it is not worth it to me.

The Home

An Englishwoman's home is her castle – even when she happens to be Italian. I should like a moat and drawbridge,

but you cannot find a house with those facilities in Chelsea, so instead I make the interior a haven.

Grazia's Low-cost Luxury Must-haves

- Freshly laundered bed sheets, ironed with lavender water. So English. This treatment will make even your oldest bed linen a pleasure to slip into.
- Candlelight is the most flattering, of course, though the IKEA tea light holds no aura of luxury for me. Instead buy simple church candles and, to save burning your house down, find pretty second-hand pottery in charity shops (hold your breath inside, the smell is *not* redolent of luxury), and pour sand on to each plate to anchor your candles, as many as you can fit on one plate.
- Loose leaf tea – so much more of a pampering ritual than ghastly tea bags. Again, charity shops are a good place to find delightful teapots, and visit a specialist shop to choose an appealing blend – jasmine, Dragonwell, Rose Oolong – *such* evocative names cannot fail to raise spirits. To make it more satisfying, bake. Even the most basic cook can make scones – though it seems no one in England can agree how to pronounce them – and you will discover the best jam at WI markets (personally I stocked up at the Save Our Shop fête). Perfect for one, perfect too for budget entertaining. A glass of sparkling Italian prosecco adds bubbles and luxury, at a fraction of the cost of champagne.
- Vanilla pods: these unpromising black pods are expensive initially, but last for ever. The best come from Madagascar, bringing with them a soft, homely fragrance and taste, which has been proven to stimulate arousal in mature men – my kind of aphrodisiac. Submerge one (a pod, not a mature man) in caster sugar to give your sugar an exquisite

flavour, or use in custard, then wash clean and store to use again. Recycling at its most glamorous.

The Garden

Cultivated gardens are the sign of a civilised society, yet the garden centre we visited on one of our recent assignments was a mercenary place, the gentle scent of tea-rose overpowered by the stench of money-making. However, creating your own Eden need not mean bankruptcy.

Grazia's Low-cost Luxury Must-haves

- Annual seeds: patience is a virtue, and your patience will be rewarded by the purchase and cultivation of seeds. Annuals will grant you but a year of colour, but what colour – some of the prettiest cottage garden flowers will brighten up your life and your borders: from sunny marigolds to proud poppies. If you are careful, you can harvest seeds for the following year. If you are careless, the plant and the birds may do the work for you, with new plants popping up where you least expect them. My Leon would often hold forth about the circle of life. It was only later that I realised he had taken the line from *The Lion King* musical. Pff!
- Herbs: again, cultivating herbs from seed will change your life (and make your cooking more flavoursome, at very little cost). Herbs are the only Mediterranean plants I allow in my garden: soft cushions of sage, spiky rosemary, soap-and-incense scented basil. Your window sill should also be home to chives (their flowers are architectural marvels), to a few salad leaves, and to parsley (but never to the showy curled type – brassy as a whore's frilly drawers).
- Cuttings: taking cuttings from other gardens is either a rewarding task, or a criminal act, depending on which

garden you target. In general, garden centres will not appreciate this, neither will stately homes. But considering carrying a pocket knife just in case (not advised if you wear a hooded top, as you may be stopped by the English bobby). Borrow a book from the library about cuttings, follow the instructions to create new plants from old, and in one year your garden could be blooming, all for free.

- Garden designers: these people are smart, but *so* expensive. In parts of Chelsea, yummy mummy women with time on their hands like to train as garden designers, but their hourly rates are higher than the cost of stocking an entire border. Invite them round for ‘free consultations’ and take notes when they are not looking. Design for nothing – and the women enjoy nosing around your yard! However, I do take care to check first that these women have the husbands working in the City of London – it is not good to waste the time of those who are sailing in the same boat of reduced circumstances, and need to work for a living.

The Body and Style

Ladies, the battle against gravity is never-ending, and one we are fated to lose. However, whether you still enjoy the flush of youth, or your flushes are now of the hot variety, there are alternatives to La Prairie and plastic surgery.

Grazia’s Low-cost Luxury Must-haves

- Olive oil: I believe that in England at one time it was only possible to buy olive oil in a pharmacy. Now, however, you are so busy drizzling your salads that you have forgotten the benefits to the skin. Olive oil is so versatile – for the cracks in the heels, for a sheen upon the legs and arms, mixed with sea salt for a body scrub. So many uses. On the body, forget

first pressings and extra virgin – these are a waste of money if they are to disappear down the plughole rather than the gullet. A very light blended oil will see you through most body emergencies. If you have grown the herbs, as I suggest above, add a lavender plant to your windowsill and use this too in your potions and baths. Perfect!

- Facial workouts: Botox is a slippery slope that leads almost always to major surgery and a wind-tunnel face. Instead, try facial exercises. There are websites or books in the library to explain the techniques, and I am told a daily set of grimaces will hold back the years. I do mine, although there is of course no telling how I would have looked without them. Important: never perform these near a man, or a window.
- The trainee: we would all prefer the designer facial, but if your budget is tight, find your local college of beauty and ask if they need the guinea pig. The products and equipment will often be of high quality, though of course the bedside manner may be lacking. Waxing and eyebrow threading by trainees are best avoided unless you have a high pain threshold (and even then, I recommend the analgesic painkiller beforehand). And never have the fake tan applied by a first-timer, unless you wish to resemble a tiger.
- Alternatives to the Booby Job: your Englishmen, they love their boobies, yes? But surgery is expensive and makes preposterous melon-like breasts. Whatever your age, a good bra is the best investment a woman can make. When I first visited your Rigby and Peller, in the footsteps of your Queen, I came away completely revitalised and so perked up. The expert bra fitter is a better friend than the plastic surgeon. Every day I also splash cold water across my chest and neck, before applying the sunscreen. A leathery chest is not feminine.

- Red lipstick and fishnet tights: if your budget does not stretch to a new outfit, then a scarlet lipstick suits almost every colouring, and gives the face that extra lift, but only when worn with complete confidence. The fishnet tights (or stockings if you have a man who will see them – not worth the discomfort otherwise) lengthen the leg and also last *so* much longer than eight-denier. The two together speak of sensuality and promise. Some may see this combination as over-the-top, but if this acts as deterrent to a man, that saves time. He should be avoided in any event, as a mummy's boy who will never be able to handle a real woman . . .

Certo, this is merely the tip of a very large iceberg, but I am hardly going to give away all my tips, am I? A woman's mystique is her currency.

Ciao!

Grazia

Emily's Ten Commandments (or how to get served like Liz Hurley)

OK. Let's face it, if you've read this far you know that before I started secret shopping I was the one person guaranteed to be ignored, patronised and generally treated as a second-class citizen of the retail world.

I wouldn't say that stores now roll out the red carpet, and no one's yet offered to give me after-hours access for my Christmas shopping, along with Posh and Madonna, but it's amazing how little changes can make a big difference. So

follow my guidance and rise up, underestimated customers. You have nothing to lose but your chain-store hell.

First Commandment: Thou shalt not slump

Body language speaks volumes. If you're like me, you'll have to summon up all your courage to step into an unfamiliar, high-end store – so don't spoil it by walking in with your shoulders hunched and your head down, as though you're just *waiting* for a bouncer to evict you from the store.

If you act as though you don't belong, then you can hardly blame the snooty assistants for thinking the same thing. Walk tall, girls and boys because . . .

Second Commandment: Thy money is as good as anyone else's

I'll admit, I might not have quite as much of it as Posh, but a fiver out of my Primark faux leather wallet is worth exactly the same as a fiver from her Burberry purse. In these credit-crunched days, shops should be grateful that you're even considering spending your hard-earned cash with them. Make them work for it!

Third Commandment: Thou shalt know what thou wants (Sandie, I'm getting a bit bored of the thou stuff now and I keep getting my thys and thous muddled. So I'm going to talk normal English now. Love, Em x)

If you're expecting the assistants to do a great job, then don't forget it's a two-way street – a well-organised, focused customer will always be popular. The clearer you can be about what you're looking for – whether it's the perfect jeans, an

outfit for an occasion or a ten-place-serving dishwasher with a cycle last-ing less than a fortnight – the more chance you have of leaving with what you want.

Fourth Commandment: Be like a Girl Guide: prepare!

Would you go on a long journey without a map or a Sat Nav? Well, OK, I probably would, but you shouldn't. And neither should you embark on a shopping mission without laying the groundwork. Find a partner in crime if you like – but only one who will give you an honest *and* tactful opinion (and if you find one, give me her number, please). Sort yourself out a route map – which stores you'll visit, where the best loos are (one well-known department store has dingy loos by the restaurant and heavenly ones by the bed department). And don't forget provisions – either take a flask or, better still, work out a nice place for a tea break. Shopping is hard work.

Fifth Commandment: Dress for the occasion

Dress up – the better you look, the more confidence you'll project. Whatever you're trying on, you want to be able to get your kit off with the minimum of fuss(!), and don't forget the appropriate bra, pants and shoes – it's hard to make a ball dress look right with your scruffy trainers. Oh, and if you're brave, go bare-faced to the store and ask for a quick makeover on the beauty counter before you hit the fashion floor – just make sure you ask for long-lasting, non-rub lipstick as you won't be popular if you smear all those nice new clothes.

Sixth Commandment: Timing is everything

If you've got the option, try to time your visit when the store's

quiet – though not just before closing time, unless you're sure what you want. Weekends, lunch times, sales or school holidays can be a bun-fight, whereas off-peak shopping tends to net you top-of-the range service.

Seventh Commandment: Make a new best (retail) friend

Sometimes we forget that the immaculately dressed assistant behind the counter might just be another human being . . . and one who'll probably respond to an honest, direct request, especially if delivered with a smile. Compliment her on *her* outfit, or thank him for his advice. Go on, make their day. Unless, of course, they're rude in which case decide then and there never to frequent the shop again. Or . . .

Eighth Commandment: Take me to your leader

If the service is beyond offensive, or not what you'd expect from a favourite store, then ask for the boss. I'll admit, it's embarrassing if the person who has committed the deed turns out to *be* the boss (happened to me lately, I did a fantastic Hyacinth Bouquet style tut and exited in a hurry). But they deserve to know if members of their team are taking the piss! I don't mean an off day – we all get those – but if the person you're dealing with has crossed the line, don't suffer in silence. Or if you daren't ask the shop assistant from hell, you could stalk him or her until they disappears off on their lunch-hour around the local cauldron and then find the manager. Cowardly? Maybe. Satisfying? You bet.

Ninth Commandment: Schedule a break

If you followed Commandment Four, you'll already have a

place in mind for a tea break, but as well as resting weary feet, a quick muffin and builder's brew can prevent expensive mistakes. Those purple and orange bell bottoms might seem less like a fashion classic when your blood sugar's back to normal.

Tenth Commandment: Ask for the world – you might just get it!

If, after a muffin, the bell bottoms still seem a fashion classic, go back and bargain. I am *hopeless* at this, so I try to pretend that I have a secret camera about my person, even when I don't, or that I am starring in an imaginary daytime TV show about getting value for money. They can only say no. All right, it tends to work better when you're trying to get that ten-place-setting dishwasher for the price of an eight- (and is less likely when you want to negotiate down the price of briefs in M&S), but really, what do you have to lose? Well, except your dignity, obviously . . . I never said it was going to be easy . . .

Curtain Up: Sandie's Top Tips for Spotting a Great Shop

Winning the job at Garnett's was, for me, like landing my first West End role. Shops are theatre, pure and simple, and you're the audience. I always saw my job as entertaining my customers, as well as selling goods. So why go to a store that doesn't care about your needs, when you could go to one that turns the whole experience into a spectacle? Here's my guide to thinking like a secret shopper – and finding the best on the high street.

Kerb Appeal

OK, you've seen Phil and Kirstie and Sarah Beeny go on about it every time they look at a house for sale, but the same rules apply to shops. The good ones beckon from across the street, the windows sparkling and the displays so tempting. If you could write your name in dust on the window pane, then walk on. They couldn't care less, so why should you?

Welcome to our World

Greeting customers is an art in itself – so take note of what happens. Ideally you get a smile of acknowledgement, perhaps a 'hello', but also some breathing space. There's nothing more off-putting than being grabbed by a commission-hungry assistant before you've even had chance to get your bearings.

Softly softly, that's what I always told my staff – and if they didn't smile, they didn't stay. I do sympathise with the people on the bottom rung of the ladder, earning the minimum wage, but a smile costs nothing and can lead directly to the next rung up.

Oh, and if the staff fall upon you like a pack of starving dogs, you know they're on commission.

Virtuoso Performance

Every store has a star – and if you find him or her, then your whole experience will be transformed. I always aimed to give the customer a performance to remember, whether it was recommending the best-fitting, rather than the most expensive, pair of shoes . . . or leaping on to a mattress fully clothed to impersonate their fidgety partner when they were trying out new beds.

Every store also has its pantomime villain. I will say the name Marsha and then move swiftly on . . . but beware. They are – hopefully – a dying breed, but you must avoid them if you see them.

The Main Event

Whether it's a discount centre or Selfridges, the products are the main event, and the store's layout should lead you towards the newest, the nicest and the best. The right shop will tempt you all the way around . . . and all the way to the till!

The role of staff is to present the products in their best light, and make sure you get what is most suited to your needs. A few sample enquiries about fabric or fit (in a boutique) or eco-rating (in home electricals) will ascertain whether the store deserves your time and money. If they can't be bothered to train their staff in the basics, then that's often a sign that other things – range, customer service, after-sales – will be lacking. OK, the less you're paying, the more self-reliant you might need to be (the prices of on-line stores reflect the fact that the customer does most of the work), but people should still be polite and know where to find what you're looking for. Be cruel to be kind – a store with bad service doesn't deserve to survive.

In the Dressing Room

Changing rooms are the closest you come to going behind the scenes of a store (unless you're a shoplifter) and they tell you plenty. I loved designing my themed Christmas changing rooms, with their extra pampering touches – hand cream, festive room fragrances, bespoke music and luxurious fabrics. I believe a store's dressing room reflects their view of the

customer: if they're scummy and smelly and scuffed then you can bet they regard you as, at best, an inconvenience. Of course, not every shop has the budget for scented candles, but it should be clean, tidy and fresh-smelling, with somewhere to put your coat, and someone on call to help you out. My favourite changing rooms in the world are the sexy boudoirs of Agent Provocateur, but for a chain store that gets it right, try the fitting rooms at Gap for size. It can be done on *all* budgets. Don't put up with any less.

Brickbats and Bouquets

How often have you asked to see the manager – to tell them how brilliant their staff are? It's happened to me just twice in my career, but each time was a special moment. If an assistant has gone out of their way to assist, why not repay the compliment? A letter or card to head office is even better . . . I know you might not feel the inclination every day, but imagine how thrilled you'll make the person who really enjoys their job.

Conversely, of course, you shouldn't hesitate to tell the manager if something's not right. I will forgive an assistant if they look tired at the end of a long day, but chatting on the phone to mates, filing nails or tutting over a reasonable request will have me demanding the manager without delay. How can they put it right otherwise?

Encore!

When you've found a shop you love, don't be a stranger. Get to know the staff, give feedback, make it part of your life . . . The good ones deserve custom, and in tricky times

you definitely don't want to come back after a year to find it boarded up. In shops, as in most things, it's use it or lose it!

Happy shopping from all of Charlie's ex-Angels . . .