

The Value of Free Time:
Commodification, Marketing, and Gender in the Personal Concierge and Errand Industry

Rachel Sherman
New School for Social Research
shermanr@newschool.edu

Abstract

The creation of markets for previously uncommodified products and services has long been of concern to historians, economists, and sociologists, who have raised questions about cultural barriers to and moral consequences of such commodification. Based on interviews and ethnography, this paper looks at one recent example of new services for sale: the personal concierge and errand industry. This industry (also known as “lifestyle management”) has emerged in the last ten years and primarily comprises small businesses run by college-educated women. These personal concierge entrepreneurs attempt to formalize and commodify a variety of miscellaneous tasks, many of which are associated with variants of women’s unpaid (and often invisible) domestic labor, including errands, organizing, gift buying, and household projects. I argue that these entrepreneurs face two major challenges. First, they must create a market, by making these services visible and acceptable to a public that is unfamiliar with and potentially suspicious of the industry. Second, they attempt to establish the occupation as having higher status than many other variants of women’s paid labor. Concierges’ primary rhetorical strategy for establishing their service as both comprehensible and legitimate is to frame it as “free time,” which “everyone” needs and is entitled to; they also frame it as distant from and hence uncorrupting of meaningful family labor. Their primary strategy for casting the occupation as legitimate is to present themselves as professionals, refuse tasks associated with subordinated labor, and maintain emotional distance and autonomy from clients. These rhetorical and practical strategies, which are often in tension with each other, illuminate cultural negotiations around commodification associated with beliefs about gendered labor, intimacy, and status.