

For men only: How to buy lingerie for your valentine

by Sharon Mosley

It's a tradition for many men at this time of year - buying lingerie for their valentines - and it's such a pleasure, isn't it guys? Well, some well-intentioned men out there may need a little help when it comes to shopping for all that intimate apparel.

"I get such a kick out of watching men steal furtive glances through the windows of my store as they walk back and forth, finally working up the nerve to enter," says Rebecca Apsan, the owner of La Petite Coquette in New York City and co-author of "The Lingerie Handbook" (Workman Publishing, \$13.95).

SMART SHOPPER - If you need a little help when it comes to shopping for lingerie, you might want to read 'The Lingerie Handbook' before you buy that intimate Valentine's Day gift. CNS Photo courtesy of Workman Publishing. "I do as much as I can to make the experience for men as comfortable as possible," says Apsan, who opened her store in 1978 and has dressed lots of celebrities, including the cast of HBO's "Sex and the City."

Apsan admits that when buying high-end lingerie, it's only natural that men feel a little awkward, surrounded by pastel walls, gilt mirrors and all those French labels dangling from padded hangers. "You're entering a woman's domain," she says.

But even if you're browsing the aisles of a department store, checking out the merchandise in the uncharted territory of women's intimate apparel, there are a few things any man should know before shopping for that special Valentine's Day present, according to Apsan.

- Get ready for sticker shock. "In cost per square inch, lingerie is more expensive than real estate," she admits. "It might seem extravagant to pay so much for things that are so small, but fabric content, craftsmanship and country of origin are the details that count when it comes to lingerie."

- Get ready to take it personally. Lingerie is one of the more personal gifts you can give; it ranks right up there with jewelry. You'll need to put some special thought into it. "She may not ever ask, but I promise she'll appreciate your honest effort to buy her something you truly believe she will love," says Apsan. "Giving lingerie shows her you think she deserves to be pampered and spoiled with luxuries befitting a queen."

- Get to know the salespeople. They know guys are nervous when they walk in the door of a lingerie shop. And you don't have to give them that line about buying it for someone else. Instead, choose a shop that is "men-friendly" and find a salesperson that you feel comfortable guiding you through the teddies and the tap pants.

- If all else fails, shop online. There are lots of lingerie Web sites available for those men who wouldn't think of darkening the door of a real, live store. Apsan's site is www.thelittleflirt.com. "Luckily for the very busy and the very embarrassed, you no longer have to show your face in a lingerie boutique to get the goods," she says.

- Do some detective work. Whether you buy in a store or online, there's one thing you absolutely have to know before you buy lingerie: What's her size? You may have to sneak a peek inside her lingerie drawers and check out those tags, Apsan says. Or ask one of her best friends. One strategy that always works, albeit without the surprise element, is to go directly to the source and ask her yourself.

- Think assets. When buying lingerie for a significant other, it's wise to know her likes and dislikes about her body. Be sensitive. One of my "fondest" memories of receiving lingerie from my husband was a very expensive silk gown and robe only days before our daughter was born. Needless to say, I never did get back into my old size and they are still hanging in my closet. Never underestimate a gift certificate!

- Know her colors. Black and sheer may be the No. 1 preference of most men, the New York lingerie expert says, but there are lots of other ways to give a special gift that says, "I thought about you, not just me!" Think about the colors she wears the most, and go from there.

- Take it back. If for some reason, that short, slinky gown was just not the right thing, you can always return it, Apsan says. "This is very common, not just with lingerie, but also with most types of clothing," she notes. "Hey, you can even go with her to exchange it and pick something out together." Now, that's a concept.

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