

Go It Alone

It's an odd job running other people's errands

AFTER five years of working in the City, Claire Brynteson, 33, knew the frustrations that go with the long-hours culture. Getting to a bank, to a chemist to pick up a prescription, or simply to the shops, was just about impossible without taking a day off — or having a very sympathetic boss.

Today she is addressing those frustrations for other people with her lifestyle management service, buy:time. The company, which she set up last year after being made redundant by an American investment bank, will take the “to do” list of any busy worker and complete all the tasks while they are at work.

Whether it is feeding pets, sorting a tax return or finding a plumber to fix a leak, the buy:time team will either do it themselves or outsource the work to vetted people.

“I love organising and managing, and the business is really just an extension of that. It was also something I had thought about doing for ages,” Miss Brynteson explains. She is the type of woman, she admits, who even files her CD collection alphabetically.

The business was not the

Elizabeth Judge says it pays to lend a helping hand to those who cannot spare the time

first of its kind to launch in the UK. Others had been quick to import the American trend, but Miss Brynteson realised that effective marketing would provide the best route to securing a good share of business.

She opted for methods that were cheap but effective: printing 5,000 flyers and posting them through doors in the more lucrative areas of the capital and sending e-mail links to the company's website to hundreds of friends. She has also joined networking groups to spread the word about her company to other professional individuals.

As a result, she had customers waiting to use the service before the company officially launched. “Psychologically, it makes all the difference when

you are not sitting waiting for the phone to ring,” she says.

Initially, clients tend to recruit buy:time to perform tasks around the house. “Then they get used to having us around and start to ask us to do other jobs,” she says. So far, Miss Brynteson and the two lifestyle managers she employs full time have done work for about 40 clients, many of whom keep returning.

One of the best sources of help, she has discovered, has been free: tapping into the knowledge of other start-up owners: “I invite them round to my house, cook lunch for them and then tell them they have two hours to tell me everything they can about running a business,” she explains.

When not attending to clients, she spends every moment dreaming up new ways of bringing her company and brand to a wider audience. “Each day I set myself a target of cold-calling a number of people with whom I have some link, however tenuous, to tell them about us.”

Buy:time's business model has been built around giving the customer as much flexibility as possible. Unlike many other lifestyle management



Home help: whatever the task, nothing is too much trouble for Claire Brynteson, centre, and her lifestyle managers Christine Leggett, left, and Jo Lim

businesses, buy:time does not require its customers to become members. “I think that it is important not to make people feel they are tied into something,” Miss Brynteson explains.

Customers are given the choice of three pricing options. They can “buy” time at a rate of £35 an hour, pay an agreed fixed price for a one-off task, or negotiate agreed terms for the company's support on a regular basis.

No task is ruled out by the

firm and some clients have already started to be quite adventurous. In one case, the company was asked to find out about dating events. “Like everything else, finding time for your love life can be difficult if you are working all hours of the day and night,” she says.

But too much flexibility is not always a good thing. In one instance, where a customer asked if her regular plumber could do a task instead of someone sourced from buy:time's preferred list of people,

he botched the job. “It was his fault, and they knew that, but it still rubs off badly on us.”

Another hole appeared in the business model when she realised that sourcing tradesmen such as plumbers would not be as easy as she had expected. “I wanted a list of one plumber, one electrician and so on, but found that many tradesmen will work in only one area of London or will only do work worth a certain amount.”

The problems that accompa-

ny growth frequently leave her exasperated. “It is a vicious circle,” she says. “As you become successful, you have to employ more people to help you, and you have to find enough money for those people to ensure they stay with you. It all eats into your profits.

“It seems that with every bit of good news for your business there comes a bit of bad news.”

She is aware that the timing of the launch — job cuts were being made in the City, where her target audience lies — was

not ideal. However, she points out: “I figure that if I can manage in a climate like the one we have just been through, things can only get easier from now on.”

Survival Tips

“Ultra-confidence is a necessity. Never stop being positive. Learn to leave the business behind at the end of the day. Keep your staff motivated.”

□ **Buy:time:** www.buy-time.co.uk; 020-7498 7934.