

DO IT BETTER!


TODAY:
Money Club

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WITH DANA GEE

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In debt? Try boot camp for spenders

Join the club: Be accountable with finances

Are your bank and credit-card statements so dismal that the sight of the word "sale" alongside the word "shoes" brings you no joy at all? If so, it sounds like you — OK, me too — could use a financial boot camp.

A year ago, five clever Vancouver women realized the same thing. And boy, what a difference a year has made.

In February 2007, Andrea Baxter, Angela Self, Katie Dunsworth, Robyn Gunn and Sandra Hanna were in Chicago telling Oprah — yes, that Oprah — and her followers that the key to their "debt diet," success was their Smart Cookies money club.

They said once they decided to band together, drinks out with the girls dried up and shopping for another pair of must-have jeans sadly didn't seem to fit any more. Instead, each Monday the women met and discussed potential purchases, set goals and waded in on each other's plans. Then they all got drunk and cried. OK, I'm just kidding, or maybe projecting, about that last part.

"Accountability was a huge part of this," says Dunsworth.

And by accountability, she doesn't mean looking in the mirror and telling your Crème de la Mer-covered face that next month you will follow a budget, honest you will.

"You had to think because every time you did something, spent money on something, you had to go and explain it at the club," says Dunsworth. "So now the Smart Cookies look like geniuses as they all work full time for the

growing Smart Cookies empire, which includes a W network TV show (Wednesdays, 9 p.m.), the upcoming book *The Smart Cookies Guide to Making Dough* and a series of seminars.

For most of us, discussing money is one of those things — like admitting you watch *Dr. Phil* and read *US Weekly* — you just are not comfortable doing.

But the Smart Cookies say it's easy in their supportive world to come clean about credit-card debt.

"We don't want to lecture," says Dunsworth. "We simply decided to figure out ways to live the best lives we can."

The route to realizing that began with smarter choices and goal setting.

"I got rid of my car," says Dunsworth. "It was crazy. I was literally driving one kilometre to work every day. I was paying for parking, getting tickets, the gas, the insurance. I saved anywhere between \$500-\$700 a month."

"I wanted this really expensive purse and I saved and saved for it," says Hanna. "By six months, I had realized how hard it was to save and how silly it was to spend that money on a purse."

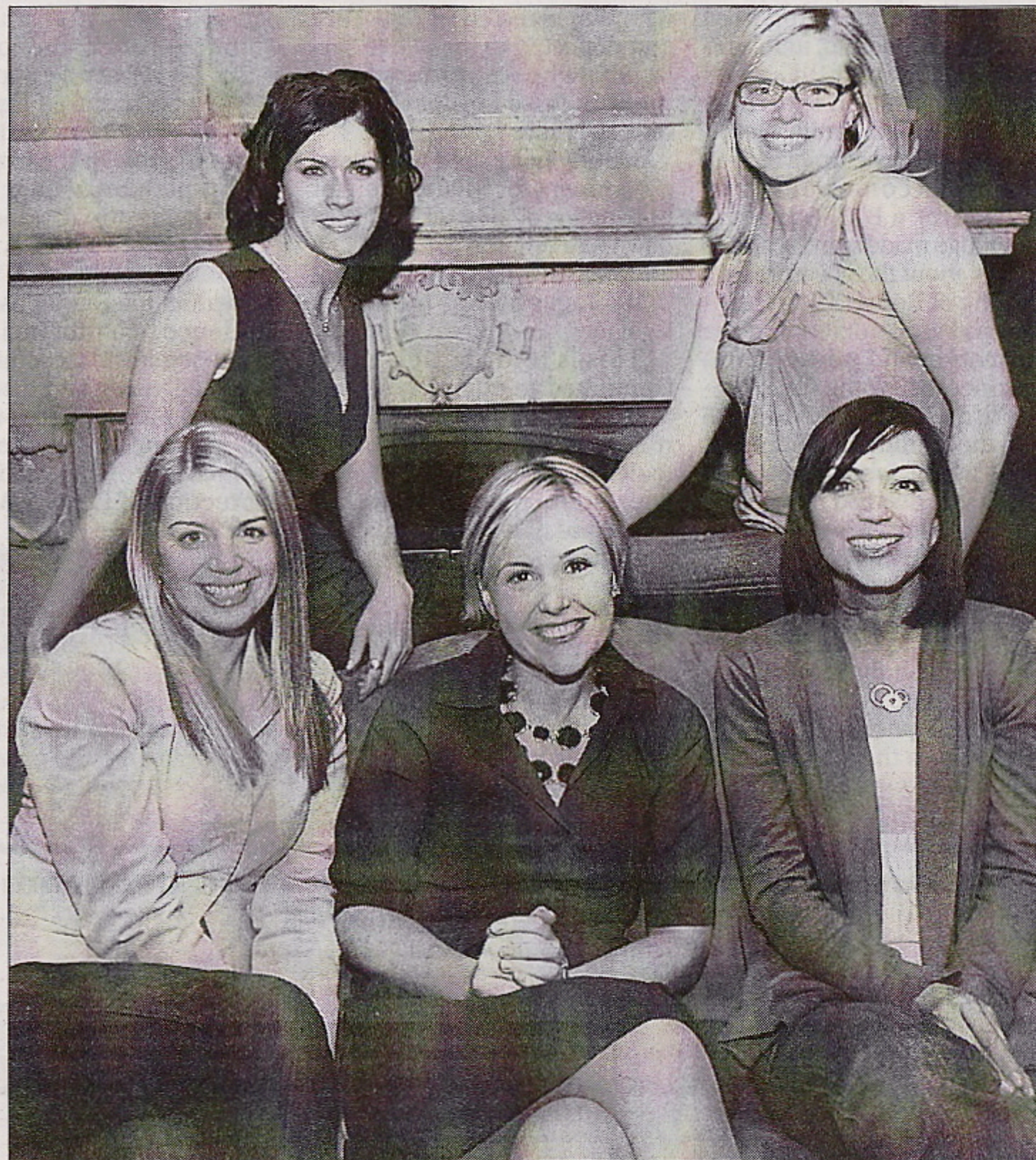
"You know, we are all very aware that we have to walk the talk and stick to what we believe," adds Dunsworth, who maintains a \$200 monthly clothing budget.

But thank goodness these women aren't perfect. That, after all, would be depressing.

Yes, Hanna confirms that there are still times that each of them needs to resort to the "Smart Cookies Hotline" to help curb an impulse to purchase.

"You call your friend and know they will talk you down," says Hanna. "They'll talk you out of buying something you don't really need."

Like a pricey purse perhaps?



Smart Cookies money club members, clockwise from lower left; Angela Self, Sandra Hanna, Andrea Baxter, Robyn Gunn and Katie Dunsworth. JASON PAYNE — THE PROVINCE