

Who's That Girl?

Retailers rejigger selections and concepts to capture the 30-something shopper.

By Caletta Crawford



Age—like size—is a very touchy subject in fashion. Just look at the deep sartorial waters Eileen Fisher found herself in last Fall after attempting to ditch her eponymous brand's image as your mother's clothing label. Beyond the sleeker, more hip fits of the clothes, she created a splash by jettisoning the usual silver-haired Boomers in the company's ad campaigns, literally trading them in for younger models. Devotees like Rosie O'Donnell were not amused. But really who

could blame her? The brand had grayed to the point of a punch line, earning a notorious place on Broadway in Nora Ephron's play "Love, Loss and What I Wore" with the line: "When you start wearing Eileen Fisher, you might as well say 'I give up.'" OUCH!

With this cautionary tale in mind, it's no wonder that fashion types are skittish about discussing age. "People tend not to want to say they're targeting people in their 30s just like they didn't want to say they're targeting 40-somethings or 50-somethings," observed Wendy Liebmann, CEO of marketing consultancy WSL Strategic Retail. "There are companies that are doing it but not liter-

ally calling out: 'If you're 30, come here.' They're addressing a fashion sensibility, a wearability and a value proposition that communicates to that life stage 'We understand what you need and we're delivering it.'"

Pinpointing the needs of customers is a safer option than bracketing them by age; no group is homogeneous, especially today. "We're seeing more fragmenting in age groups than there used to be. They're breaking up and becoming submarket groups," explains Dudley Blossom, Ph. D and associate professor at LIM College, which focuses on the business of fashion. "The Baby Boomer generation was born in a narrow range—about a five year



time span—so they have the same history defined by coming out of World War II. Younger demographics like Gen X and Y don't have as consistent a background."

Without this shared experience, it's challenging to identify the desires of a whole generation, but a few generalizations may be safe: we're past the slouchy logo sweats and Uggs phase although we are not ready to morph into our mothers quite yet. Combine that with the new pragmatism everyone's adopted (thanks to the recession) and today's 30-year-old consumers are shopping a lot differently than we did a decade ago.

"In my 20's, I was very trendy and now I have more of a classic look," explained Carla Stocker, a single 40-year-old Wells Fargo banker from the Atlanta area, adding that she turns to funky accessories to punch up her look. "In my 20's, if I saw it and wanted it, I bought it. There wasn't a thought process. Now, I think about if I need it or have it in my closet already."

This idea of stopping to consider a purchase—based on quality, aesthetics or need—is a hallmark of 30-plus shopping. Meredith Levy, a 35-year-old New York mom and founder of the Pint Size Social on-

line magazine, demands more from each purchase than she did in the past. "Ten years ago, I was buying trendier items, but now the longevity of the item is more important to me," she said. "You realize you have a closet full of things that are very one season, and you don't want that anymore."



INTRODUCING THE NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Retailers are responding to these shifting demands, aiming stores and collections towards the various

needs of this demographic, which spans many life stages (including singles, marrieds, moms, stay-at-homes and career women). Some have taken the Urban Outfitters approach to appealing to shoppers who've graduated from their initial store concepts. Like Urban, which begot Anthropologie—an outlet that draws a wide range of ages with its trendy but accessible product and cozy store format—American Eagle Outfitters launched Martin + Osa in 2006. Unlike American Eagle shoppers who typically measure time in semesters, the new 28-location chain seeks to lure 25-to-40-year-olds with more sophisticated denim-focused merchandise. Currently the store is chockablock with the season's safari-inspired trends, including utility pants and tees emblazoned with animal illustrations that coincidentally recall the outback aesthetic competitor Banana Republic launched with decades ago. Though the sales help is friendly and the layout inviting, M+O has left some shoppers cold.

Thirty-eight year old Jennifer Vallez of Connecticut describes herself as an impulsive shopper who prefers to fill her closet via the Internet thanks to her time-strapped schedule as a mother of two young



girls and owner of the Sophie & Lili children's clothing and accessory company. Though she says American Eagle is way too young for her now, she thinks Martin + Osa might have skewed too far in the other

the location in the Mall of America in Minneapolis," she said, "and I did see nice things that I would buy but I thought the stuff was overpriced." Monogram, Banana Republic's more tailored (read: mature) collec-

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direction. "Martin + Osa is really boring. It's too safe, and I'm not a crazy dresser," she said. "No one piece stands out to me at all." Vallez does credit the chain with having covetable accessories, which are often branded goods like Ray-Ban, Havaianas and Dolce Vita.

Though based on the selection, she could see herself shopping there, Stocker was ultimately turned off by the M+O's prices. "I shopped

tion, has received a similar reaction among shoppers who question the value. Vallez, who used to shop at Banana Republic before it became "boring", said Monogram is also underwhelming. "I've looked at the collection online, and I think Monogram is too pricey for what it is."

TAKING A REFRESHER COURSE

Ann Taylor is among the established retail names looking to project a less

stodgy, if not younger image. Last fall, the store blanketed women's magazines with ads touting "The New Ann." Turns out, this meant more trend-right pieces that extended beyond the store's former business-attire niche. For instance, this spring bright corals and yellows beam from racks while simple sheaths and ruff led tops beckon. And whether it was the marketing or merchandising, consumers seem to be taking note. Vallez, who lists Anthropologie as one of her favorite stores, stated a renewed interest. "I've been shopping more at Ann Taylor lately. I think they have a new designer; things seem more modern and more of my style."

At Ann Taylor, the company says that it's seeking to woo "modern women" though it doesn't pinpoint an age. Similarly, Neiman Marcus' Cusp concept acknowledges that its core customer is probably in her 30s but the aim is for multi-generational appeal. "We don't talk about age because we believe that in contemporary [fashion] we know we can dress a wide range of ages," said Russ Patrick, managing director of Cusp. "It's about her lifestyle and how she perceives herself."

Patrick said the Cusp model, which launched in 2006, offers a carefully edited selection of contemporary fashion for active women. "She is extremely busy with such a busy calendar she's constantly looking for things to update her wardrobe," he stated, explaining that the stores are laid out for expedience. "If she's shopping for something to go out in that night, we could take her to a specific room in the store,

and everything would be curated for her and appropriate for that."

The Cusp team shops hundreds of lines, cherry picking the pieces that are best for their customer. According to Vallez, the tactic works. "I think Cusp is more my style. I grew up in New York, and Cusp is more like a boutique," she said. "Everything feels really well edited. There's a lot of thought going into J. Crew or Madewell product, but [unlike Cusp] you feel like it's all mass produced."

Cusp's goal of outfitting shoppers from weekend casual to a night out on the town is also a strength of J. Crew, which shoppers and industry insiders alike credit for its staying power and cross-generational appeal. "J. Crew seems to have a very broad audience because of the mix of styling from good-looking everyday wear going up to the classic pieces for more special occasions," noted Liebmann, adding the range of price points means there's something for everyone. "Martin + Osa struggles with that. When you see the quality and presentation, it is a really pleasant place to shop. But is it worth the price or too high priced? J. Crew has different price and quality points in one store."

J. Crew is also praised thanks to its push into new markets like kids and weddings. "J. Crew looks much better and the quality is better," Levy confirmed. "I love shopping the locations with Crewcuts. It's one-stop shopping."

SETTING THE TONE

Convenience is key when catering to the demands—work, children and social—that pull 30-somethings in different directions, but it's only part of the puzzle. Increasingly retailers are focusing on consumer experience. Patrick said the differences between the Neiman Marcus stores and Cusp locations are designed around the type of shopper each is trying to lure. "The physical plan is different from Neiman Marcus.

There's a lot of energy in the Cusp store, and we pay a lot of attention to music," he said. The challenge for Cusp, which operates six standalone locations, will be to bring that experience into its newly announced shop-in-shops within select Neiman Marcus stores.

Blossom points to places like Apple stores and Barney's as leaders in creating environments suited to their target customers. "Barney's creates a luxurious experience. Apple creates an Adventureland for shoppers whether they're buying or not," he said. "Stores are realizing that one of the only ways they have left to remain competitive is to create a customer experience that the shoppers want to be a part of."

Levy, for one, can list the characteristics that make for a pleasant shopping experience. "I don't like music that is too loud and lighting is key. I enjoy really good dressing rooms and skinny mirrors," she said, adding Lululemon offers one of the best shopping experiences. "I was blown away by the staff and the clothes. Shopping for workout clothes is like shopping for bathing suits. You need a helpful staff. Other stores should model around them."

Liebmann said it's important for retailers to remember that women shop for a variety of different reasons. "Sometimes shopping is about necessity and sometimes it's about needing a moment to your-

self," she explained, adding that the tone and merchandising have to work. "Things like the noise level, type of music and the experience level of the staff are all really important in determining if a store is for you or your younger sister." **S**

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