

# Personal Business

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## Savings Outweigh Any Stigma at Upscale Consignment Shops

By HILLARY CHURA

Once the purview of fashion aficionados seeking deals on power suits and Prada boots, consignment stores have diversified. Now, just about anyone can find what they are looking for, be it clothes for children and teenagers, wedding dresses, men's wear, plus-size garments, furs, jewelry, formal wear and even sneakers.

With just four months between her engagement and wedding this month, Renee Salomon of Chicago did not have time to order a gown and wait for it to be made. So she found I Do Designer Bridal Consignment, a consignment store in Chicago, where she paid \$1,600 for a Vera Wang A-line that would retail for about \$5,000 new. Sure, her dress had been down the aisle before, but it fit her size 12 frame, whereas most off-the-rack dresses were sample gowns that were too small.

"Buying it on consignment, you get dresses from people who are real sizes," Mrs. Salomon said.

Stores selling consignment, resale and otherwise "gently used" shoes and clothing have gone mainstream. The National Association of Resale and Thrift Stores said it had 25,000 stores — up from about 20,000 five years ago. Used-merchandise stores tallied \$7.8 billion in sales in 2002, the latest figure available, up 29 percent from 1997, compared with \$3.1 trillion and a 24 percent increase for overall retail sales, according to the Census Bureau, which in addition to measuring the population examines economic statistics.

Regardless of their specialization or whether they buy merchandise outright or take it on consignment, shops generally prefer recognizable names — Armani, Burberry, A Pea in the Pod and Gap, depending on their clientele — that either have never been worn or look new, with no stains, rips or missing buttons.

The stores tend to be more upscale than many charity-run thrift stores because their suppliers want cash for their castoffs, not just warm feelings for having donated to a good cause.

"With the explosion of prices on designer merchandise, it really is a fabulous solution," said Howard Davidowitz, chairman of Davidowitz & Associates, a national retail consultancy and investment bank based in New York. "And for kids, it's so logical; they grow right out of everything."

Consignment shops were once mostly mom-and-pop enterprises, but big business is jumping on the re-



Photographs by John Gress for The New York Times

sale bandwagon. The Winmark Corporation began franchising Once Upon a Child in 1993 and the teenage-oriented resale shop Plato's Closet in 1999. There are more than 200 Once Upon a Child stores in the United States and Canada, and the company plans to open more at the rate of 10 a year. Plato's Closet has 170 resale shops and could support 500, said its

Kathy Yost, left and above, shops for a wedding dress at I Do Designer Bridal Consignment in Chicago. Besides vintage and designer gowns at savings of thousands of dollars, the shop sells accessories like slips and tiaras.

director, Scott Giesinger. He said clothing items from brands like Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister, Old Navy, American Eagle and Gap sold for an average of about \$10 each, and represented 80 percent of business.

Lisa Brown of Marietta, Ga., said she had been reluctant to shop at consignment or resale stores until a neighbor took her to PB&J, a children's and maternity consignment shop in Marietta, about a year ago. Now she goes about once a week to look for clothes for her 2-year-old daughter, Arabella, and her 7-year-old son, Addison.

"I guess I thought it wasn't good quality or carefully selected items," she said. "Pretty much everything you pick up looks brand new or is brand new with the tags still on it."

Style Plus Consignment, a plus-size store in Houston, sells designer names like Dana Buchman and Ellen

Tracy as well as brands like Talbots and Lane Bryant, and the items are ideally no more than three years old. Its owner, Ruth Crownover, acknowledged having to overcome the ick factor.

"When people say, 'I don't think I could wear something that someone else has had on,' I say, 'When you try it on down at Neiman's, you don't know who's tried it on before you.' It could've been tried on by 15 people."

Vanessa Morman of Houston, a marketing consultant with a public relations firm, is a repeat customer at Style Plus.

"Every time I have a business trip, I come here first. They have some serious power suits here," she said. A recent purchase was a sleeveless beige Dana Buchman linen dress suit that cost \$109. "Even though I am heavy, I still need to feel business-like."

One of the relatively few men's resale and consignment stores — Gentlemen's Resale — has been in business for almost 14 years in Manhattan. With prices that hover around 70 percent off, the store will sell Burberry trench coats for less than \$250,



## Know How to Find the Gems

Shopping at consignment or thrift stores can work for fashion connoisseurs who are as concerned with brand name and fit as they are with price. It is a gamble, however, for those in a rush to find a specific garment. Here are some tips on how to find the shops and what to look for once you're there:

¶ Search online with keywords like "plus-size consignment" or "children's consignment" or at the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops ([www.narts.org/shopping/](http://www.narts.org/shopping/)).

¶ Know a store's return policy. Most sales are final, so check for stains, missing buttons, tears or other imperfections.

¶ Ask if prices are negotiable.

¶ Try on clothing to make sure it has not been altered.

¶ Shop frequently, because new

merchandise comes in regularly.

¶ Snap it up if you see something you love — hot items can go quickly.

¶ Realize you probably won't find this season's most up-to-date separates, but you could be in luck with those from last year.

¶ If you find something you adore but it's the wrong size, don't bother asking if it is available in a different size. Most pieces are one-off offerings.

¶ Don't fixate on finding a particular dress — say, charcoal in color with a slightly off-center white bow, V-neck and side slit. Instead, shop the category: work dresses, pants suits, evening wear or handbags.

¶ Flip through all the garments on a rack — you may not notice a gem wedged between less attractive pieces.

Tod's loafers for \$110, Giorgio Armani dress shirts for \$55 to \$110 and Brioni suits for \$495. Gary Scheiner, the owner, stays away from Gap and Banana Republic but has expanded to include designer jeans that sell for \$55 to \$75.

At I Do in Chicago, brides-to-be may select from more than 500 consigned gowns, at prices from \$200 to \$2,000, as well as assorted accessories, like slips and tiaras. The dresses include vintage and couturier gowns as well as some from first-run bridal stores. Some still have price tags attached (sometimes because the bride continued to shop, not be-

### High demand leads to chains that sell 'gently used' designer items.

cause the wedding didn't happen, the owner, Kelly Hamilton, said). Dresses sell for half their original price, and clients range from brides with blindingly big engagement rings and plans for equally extravagant Four Seasons receptions to brides on a budget.

"You would think that someone who is sporting a 4-carat diamond solitaire would not be shopping consignment, but brides like to save, and

they realize they're in the dress 10 hours and would rather save the money for the honeymoon or a new home," Ms. Hamilton said.

Vintage Collections, a year-old boutique on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, specializes in 1950's through 70's evening and outerwear, Chanel suits and shoes, and 80's and 90's apparel from designers like Gianni Versace and Franco Moschino. Recent stock included a pair of Versace red vinyl and crushed-velvet thigh-high boots from the 80's or 90's, rhinestone encrusted handbags from the 60's and a long, beaded gold coat from Saks Fifth Avenue, more than 40 years old, that was priced at \$1,200.

Nadine, a stylish Manhattanite who said she refused to buy retail (and refused to give her full name), perused Vintage Collections recently for a gown to wear to a wedding. She prefers vintage wear, she said, because "a girl can't walk into a regular department store and pick it up."

Sandra Gary from Sausalito, Calif., visited Vintage Collections with a suitcase of golden dresses from the 1930's, 40's and 50's. They had been in her family's home on Long Island and she wanted to see if Vintage Collections would sell them for her. (Ms. Gary ultimately held off on a decision.)

"It's better their life should go on rather than hanging in the attic getting musty," Ms. Gary said.