

Attention, Fashionistas: Sample Sales Are Expanding

By HILLARY CHURA MARCH 25, 2007

A BRAND new Diane von Furstenberg string bikini for \$70, a Baccarat crystal wine glass for \$36 and a \$10,000 Tourneau woman's watch for \$5,000. Hermès ties for half off. Prices like these are enough to make even a savvy shopper do a double take.

Sniffing out bargains is part of the national psyche, and sample sales — where the discounts in many cases can be anywhere from 50 percent to 80 percent — are becoming a feature of the urban shopping maelstrom in New York and a few other cities.

Once catering mostly to in-the-know, vermicelli-thin fashion mavens, these events now offer stellar deals to shoppers of all sizes while giving retailers a way of selling overstock and end-of-season merchandise. Today's offerings have expanded to include men's and children's clothing, housewares, jewelry, shoes, stemware and furniture.

At a recent multi-designer sale in Manhattan, Linette Espinal was thumbing through the racks. She was wearing a brown oatmeal and black jacket she had bought at a Caché sample sale for about half-price. "You don't really have to be rich to wear something fabulous," she said. "You can look rich and even pretend a little without having to tell."

An estimated 70 percent of sample sales are in New York, and they are growing in popularity in Los Angeles, according to Dannielle Romano, editor at large at

DailyCandy.com, which sends e-mail lists of sample sales to subscribers. A few companies run traveling road shows in other cities, some with better discounts than others.

Mary Awosika of Sarasota, Fla., was visiting a friend in New York recently when they plotted out that day's sample sales with military precision.

"I love fashion; I love getting deals," she said. "Here you get designer stuff, high-end quality stuff for prices you would get at Express."

At Showroom Seven in the garment district of Manhattan, Ms. Awosika paid \$20 for a Fins Denim jeans skirt that probably would have retailed for \$175. She also paid \$30 for a light green, cashmere-blend Beverly & Monika top that might have gone for \$250 at a department store.

Sample sales attract people from a range of incomes. Dressing rooms can be crowded with women with big diamond rings and sleek fur coats as well as hipsters looking to supplement their H&M wardrobes.

Initially, sample sales dispensed actual designer samples, created for models who would show off a clothing line to department store buyers. Some fashion houses still run their sales that way. But as an increasing number of national retailers look to unload acres of inventory, many sales are like a three-day rugby scrum.

Frenzied shoppers can be seen reaching into the same boxes — pulling items out and casting them aside — or elbowing their way through the crowd to reach a desirable rack of clothing. Some wave and shout to try to catch the attention of friends.

Many designers hold their sample sales in the garment district or in their own showrooms or basements. Some large national marketers use sales organizers including Soiffer-Haskin (www.soifferhaskin.com), Clothingline (www.clothingline.com) and Billion Dollar Babes (billiondollarbabes.com). The sales usually run twice a year, one for spring and summer lines and the other for winter and fall collections.

Online sites like Topbutton.com, DailyCandy.com, Budgetfashionista.com and Lazarshopping.com also send out periodic lists of sample sales to subscribers.

“Everybody has excess goods. They have to get rid of them somehow,” said Michael Barbarino, sales coordinator for Clothingline.

The New York fashion consultant Elena Castaneda says that many marketers try to keep their sample sales quiet for fear of alienating the big department stores that sell the wares at full price. Few of the companies that offer sample sales returned telephone calls or e-mail messages for this article.

One of the few to respond, a spokeswoman for Diane von Furstenberg, said such sales give the designer a controlled way to sell overstock. Indeed, many luxury brands use sample sales to discreetly shed merchandise without resorting to a national discount chain.

At Baccarat’s sale in March, crystal glasses that might retail for several hundred dollars could be had for 60 percent and 80 percent off. Jaime E. Jimenez, a spokesman, said the merchandise might have been used in photo shoots or displayed in a store, so Baccarat would not sell it as new. The company runs its own large sample sales at its New Jersey warehouse but used Soiffer-Haskin for the March event in New York.

Tourneau uses sample sales for watches and pens that have been discontinued or have not sold. Discounts range from 35 percent to 50 percent on watches originally priced from \$200 to \$30,000, but the stock varies at each sale.

Executives were concerned that a sample sale would hurt a brand whose watches can cost more than a car, but Andrew Block, Tourneau executive vice president, said that this had not happened. And the company makes money even with the markdowns, he said.

Before she became pregnant, Dierdre Laterman of New York frequented high-end sample sales for herself. Now expecting her second daughter, she went to a Jacadi sample sale in February and picked up bedding for the new baby.

“It used to be Size 2’s,” Ms. Laterman said of the clothing selection. “Not anymore. They’ve really changed over the last couple years. The quality and amount and stock have gotten much better.”

Be warned: for all the genuine savings to be found, sample sales can also be another marketing ploy. Denise Wilson, a public relations consultant from Brooklyn, said she bought her daughter a pink skirt at what was billed as a sample sale in December — only to find the item later for less. “I thought I was getting a deal and saw it online at full price for \$36 or \$38,” she said.

SAMPLE sales are not for everyone. Ms. Castaneda cautioned that unless shoppers are fashion-savvy or disciplined, they may buy something because of its price and then never wear it. “It’s not a value if you are not going to use it or it’s not really flattering,” she said.

Of course, the cost of money is time — and sometimes a bit of dignity or convenience. Sample-sale enthusiasts must be willing to hang up their own clothes and to tolerate bare-bones or nonexistent dressing rooms. Some shoppers preemptively wear body suits under their clothes so they can disrobe and try on the merchandise with modesty. Others can’t be bothered — and strip down in a corner.

“People have no shame, taking clothes off and trying things on,” said Flora Soto, a sample-sale veteran who lives in Jersey City.

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