



FASHIONISTAS

Unite!

The State of Luxury Retail

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This just in: It's okay to shop! So, grab your wallets and head to your favorite shopping spot. This recession has been hard on everyone, and fashionistas have suffered tremendously. It's one thing to give up the private jet, but the Louboutins? Horrors!

And, if you're one of those rebels who shopped for the last 12 months – damn the recession! – we know you've made a few changes to your routine. Just how many plain brown paper bags do you have hidden in your closet? You know who you are. The sales consultants at all your favorite haunts stock the non-descript totes to protect you from the onslaught of public scrutiny as you stroll to your auto with treasures in tow.

"You'll not only find treasures from traditional luxury brands, but I also bring great pieces from emerging designers so you can make smart buys and still stay ahead of the fashion game."

— Personal Stylist Jenna Doughton



Few cities around the globe boast the vast array of retail that we do in Las Vegas. How can we possibly stay away from the hallowed halls of retail bliss?

But...much as we hate to admit it, some things *have* changed. As one confirmed shopper confided, "Our tastes haven't changed, just our budgets."

"Time is money, and we're all trying to stretch our dollars," said Jenna Doughton, personal stylist. "However, we still can't afford to make a fashion faux pas."

So, how does one fill her closets with Chanel, Valentino, Manolo or Diane von Furstenberg without causing a major portfolio reduction?

Doughton recognized early on in 2009 that her clients might be budget challenged during the recession, so she decided to offer new and cost-effective services to her menu. One of her most popular to date has been — drum roll please — *Recessionista Parties!*

"These are intimate gatherings where I bring the store to you," said Doughton. "You'll not only find treasures from traditional luxury brands, but I also bring great pieces from emerging designers so you can make smart buys and still stay ahead of the fashion game."

On a recent Sunday morning, I headed over to Krista Darnold's house, to experience one for myself. Darnold held several parties in 2009, with plans to hold more. She's had many repeat attendees, but occasionally, new friends and contacts get that much-coveted invite.

The family room is set up like a private

showroom, clothes hung on rolling racks, accessories displayed on the dining table, shoe boxes line the floor. Peach bellinis and bagels occupy the kitchen island and, slowly but surely, friends drop in to enjoy the company and the bargains.

"What I love about these parties is that I can find something really special at a great price," said Darnold. "Jenna has opened me up to more luxurious labels. I've definitely dialed up to a more sophisticated look."

And the prices are incredible! Are those really Chanel shoes for \$330? Or, a DVF dress for \$140? These are not resale items, folks. These are tempting, first-rate beauties that want to find good homes.

The star of the show, Doughton, searches out great pieces at fabulous prices, and shares them with her clientele and their friends. She's been known to buy something special just because she didn't have the heart to see it get damaged by disrespectful shoppers. Like a matchmaker with a sixth sense, Doughton aims to find the perfect look for her clients, incorporating amazing finds into the mix.

I glance over and see Doughton fast at work. Today, she knows everyone who is here, and she's preselected items for many of them. She coaches ladies to "Try this on." "This is perfect for you." "No, those shoes are too big." "If you just hem this skirt a little bit, it's fabulous!" "Wear that with some black tights and over-the-knee boots, and you'll rock it!"

The party has a comfortable flow with the master bedroom serving as the fitting room, à

la Lochmann's. No shy lassies here!

"These parties are so much fun! This is definitely a non-intimidating setting," said Darnold. "There's no pressure to buy so it's more relaxing, like playing dress-up! We try things we wouldn't normally try if we were in a store shopping alone." Doughton also spends time explaining size specifics for the different labels, along with style, cut, fabric and quality to her guests.

Part of the incentive to host one of these events is two hours of complimentary services from Doughton. Her strength is in her eye for what is perfect for you, and she won't let you buy anything that isn't.

"I see the value in her services," said Darnold, a long-time client of Doughton's styling talent. "She's a great money saver for me. I used to go to stores and just buy multiples of everything. Jenna shows me how to mix up and expand my wardrobe so I spend less money on frivolous things. She helps me find items that fit in my budget and lifestyle -- things that work for me."

"This is also a great way for people to understand what it's like to work with a personal stylist," said Doughton. "They can pick my brain and get their feet wet although this is a little different than when I work one-on-one with my clients."

In addition to *Recessionista Parties* and traditional styling services, Doughton has been busy lately reworking people's closets. This is a simple, money-saving way to freshen your wardrobe.



First, she comes in and does a quick cleaning – if it doesn't fit, is out of style, or damaged and can't be repaired, it's gone. Then, the client tries on the rest of her wardrobe. Items that need to be repaired or altered go into a pile. "I never knew the importance of good alterations until I started working with Jenna," said Darnold.

What's left gets organized, and that's when Doughton really begins to work her magic combining, accessorizing, and mixing things up.

Doughton documents the changes with photos, presenting a look-book to the client so they don't have to mentally catalog all the different outfits. Darnold showed me photos of 15 different outfits she could create with just one pair of gray slacks. Doughton also creates a shopping list for items you need to complete your looks, and she'll even shop with you to make sure you buy the right things.

"Jenna is my best kept secret," said Ellen Bramble, another Doughton client and Recessionista Partygoer. "I need to be cost effective with my wardrobe, and with Jenna I've learned to mix and match. People always comment on how great I look all the time, and it's all because of Jenna. By spending a few hundred dollars to have an expert eye look at your closet can save you thousands of dollars in purchases."

The Experts Weigh In

Even if our shopping habits haven't changed, our shopping *experience* has. Inventories are down, and there are fewer sales consultants to wait on us hand and foot. Shopping just isn't what it used to be.

Kate Newlin, veteran business strategist and author of "Shopportunity! How to be a Retail Revolutionary" and "Passion Brands," says that when it comes to shopping, a woman wants

to feel lucky. And while there are 100,000 different ways to deliver luck, retailers feel the shortest way to get there is to discount.

"Part of what Jenna does is to edit the selections and to make it enjoyable," said Newlin. "That profound personalization delivers a fabulous experience. She's brought back the fun and made the experience more valuable."

"Wealthy customers are being more conservative," said Richard Baker, CEO of Premium Knowledge Group. "Their frequency of shopping and amount spent per trip slowed, but now, their frequency is picking up. The aspirational shoppers are the ones that really hurt the market. The luxury shopper bases spending power on net worth, not annual income. However, the aspirational shopper developed a taste for luxury goods, but has had to pull back dramatically. There was not too much downturn in the true luxury market."



“We now buy the label but not the quality because we don’t understand the nuances of the fabric or construction or fit,” Newlin said. “The salesperson is the one to inform us and without that training, everything just becomes a commodity. Jenna is offering that in one of the most personal of spaces—someone’s home.

“When you spend good money for something, you want that brand to mean something,” continued Newlin. “We started thinking the reason we bought Gucci was the buckle, so it became a marker of conspicuous consumption. We forgot that they were spectacularly well made, fit the moment you put them on, and worth repairing. We tweezed apart the name from the quality. Now people are forgetting to repair their Gucci loafers. These things last forever.”

According to Newlin, now is the time of inconspicuous consumption. “Some people don’t want to be seen shopping. Folks in New York say they’re having lunch at Fred’s, rather than they’re shopping at Barneys, even though Fred’s is the café on the ninth floor at Barneys. They have to pass a lot of goodies to get to lunch!”

“The high-end has shut off its money so they don’t look indulgent,” said Alf Nucifora, chairman of the Luxury Marketing Council in San Francisco and Las Vegas. “The very high-end is starting to come back, but overall retail will be down for awhile, so we just have to ride it out. When the dust settles, Las Vegas retail will be number two behind New York, just like entertainment and high-end dining. When things start turning around, Vegas will be back with a vengeance!”

Feeling Lucky in 2010

So, if we’re supposed to feel lucky when we’re shopping, what better place than Las Vegas! Several luxury retailers must feel the same way because they invested in Las Vegas’ future with the opening of Crystals at CityCenter.

Many of the luxury brands represented at Crystals have other stores in Las Vegas, but they’re doing it bigger and better with their new location. In fact, the Louis Vuitton store is its largest in North America. The 14,000-square-foot facility boasts three fabulous floors of

clothing, accessories and leather goods.

Speaking of lucky, there’s a gaming section in the store where you can special order a new piece created in honor of CityCenter and Macau. The Malle Casino, a traveling roulette and poker monogram trunk, can be special ordered for a mere \$107,000.

Still, are people really spending big bucks in this economy? “As always, our traditional bags are our most popular sellers. The lightweight Neverfull tote and iconic Speedy are flying off the shelves,” said LaLonde. “At the same time, we have demand for the one-of-a-kind exceptional pieces like the Casino Trunk and our exotic handbags. The Monogram Stresa was a recently popular launch. I’m also sure our Insolite wallets with colored leather linings will be popular.”

But, it’s not just products that bind us to a company, it’s also the experience. So, is our favorite monogram brand doing anything special to strengthen relationships with their customers during these challenging economic times?

“We look at our business long-term and even in challenging cycles we continue to nourish the brand with innovative collaborations, fresh product offerings and new stores,” said LaLonde. “We are constantly aiming to elevate our customers’ experience by creating additional services and enhancing existing ones.”

To that end, the CityCenter Louis Vuitton offers a wide array of unique, personalized experiences and services. One is the Product Care and Service Center highlighting their heritage and craftsmanship and offering a full array of product care and repair services.

Customers are also encouraged to visit the Personalization Center for unique services, including hot stamping, Mon Monogram, and special orders. In this store, the dedicated men’s lounge showcases the full men’s product offering in an intimate environment. Lastly, the luxurious private salons and personal shopping services offer the ultimate level of attention and service.

While the economy and our personal accounts might not be restored to their perfect shape, the truth is, Las Vegas offers a variety of ways for you to satisfy your inner fashionista. Bring your debit cards and I’ll meet you at Crystals, uh, I mean, Beso! ◻