

Invitation Only

Yearning for hassle-free sample-sale shopping?

Find it online at the latest trend, Gilt Groupe.

—R.B.



TO ALEXIS MAYBANK AND ALEXANDRA WILKIS WILSON, it doesn't get more serious than a sample sale. A rare opportunity to stock up on heavily discounted designer duds, a sample sale guarantees exclusivity, luxury payoff, and the time pressure of beating others to the retail punch.

But Maybank and Wilkis Wilson—both seasoned shoppers—immediately saw a flaw in the plan.

"We love fashion but don't have the time to duck out to sample sales every day," Wilkis Wilson explains. So what began as a lack of convenience quickly turned into a business opportunity the two couldn't ignore. They began brainstorming, and before long discovered a solution: Take sample sales online. In November 2007 the pair successfully launched Gilt Groupe, an invitation-only e-commerce site that offers high-end sample

sales from coveted designers and luxury brands (including Valentino and Zac Posen) at up to 70 percent off retail prices.

"Gilt Groupe enables its members to effectively shop at a sample sale every day from the convenience of their own desk at work or at home," Wilkis Wilson says. "We make shopping for luxury and fashion items hassle-free and informative, and expose our members to designers they know and love as well as up-and-comers from around the world."

Friends since they met at Harvard Business School, Maybank and Wilkis Wilson always knew they wanted to go into business together. After graduation Maybank worked for several years at eBay (she's one of the company's founding members), while Wilkis Wilson entered the luxury fashion world, gaining retail experience at both Louis Vuitton and Bulgari.

"For years Alexandra and I would attend designer sample sales together," Maybank says. "We'd receive numerous calls from friends and family instructing us on which designers they'd like us to go and see, not to mention the exact items they'd love us to bring back for them.... We came to the conclusion that this could be a viable business model if we brought it online."

That they did, working hard to create a concept that's a modern online version of the real thing. Members of Gilt Groupe receive an e-mail announcing that day's 36-hour sample sales, each featuring hand-selected styles from a single designer. Catering to men, women, and children, the site hosts 15 to 17 designer sales per week; but time is of the essence. "All of our sales are based on limited inventory, so members have to be quick as we do sell out early," Wilkis Wilson says. "The whole process takes about 20 seconds, from when you first get the e-mail announcing the beginning of the event, to checkout." The site offers same-day shipping, and authenticity is guaranteed. "Our buyers work directly with the designers and not third parties," Maybank says. "Additionally, Gilt Groupe partnered with the Council of Fashion Designers of America in January of 2008. This means that our sample sales come straight from the designers' no-sale racks."

Now, more than a year after the site's official launch, Gilt Groupe continues to thrive. "We're launching in Japan this month and are thrilled to expand into Asia," Wilkis Wilson says. "Our site is constantly evolving." In the next few months, the pair says, online clients can expect extensive updates to the site, including a brand-new design to make navigation easier and faster. Maybank and Wilkis Wilson also plan to further develop content on the site's blog. But as the company continues to grow, its initial goals remain the same, Maybank says.

"Think of Gilt Groupe as that fashionable friend who always has the clothes you want," she says. "The difference is that these items are available at considerably discounted prices and involve no real 'shopping.'" Sign us up. Visit gilt.com/gotham.