

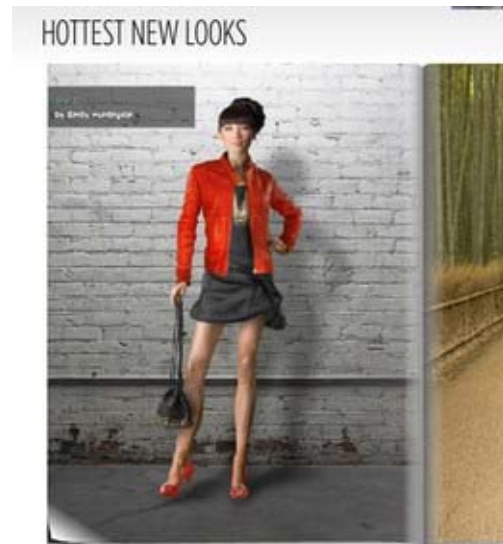
The Next Wave: Fashion Brands Test New Social Media Platforms

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Posted **MONDAY MARCH 22, 2010**

From [WWD ISSUE 03/22/2010](#)

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As the social media landscape changes faster than Lady Gaga's wigs, fashion companies on the hunt for customers and buzz are looking beyond Facebook, Twitter and blogs to new emerging platforms.

There is no lack of sites and applications to try, as the weeks and months bring scores of copycats or, in some cases, completely new concepts that use the Internet in previously unimagined ways, from the controversial Chatroulette to Foursquare to Foodspotting, a visual and local food guide and game that debuted at the South By Southwest conference in Austin this past week.

While the variety of collaborations and novelties is seemingly endless, partnerships with various types of fashion social networks such as Polyvore, Chictopia and Lookbook are among the most popular. Many of the newest ideas mix Web, mobile and local.

As companies refine and deepen their strategies on Facebook, Twitter and blogs and in social media generally, they are discovering that content aimed at multiple platforms and networks of people adds up to more than the sum of its parts, and can create sizable buzz and traffic for a brand.

In some cases, the engagement is thought to be a more effective means of advertising than traditional online display ads and can affect orders and design. At the same time, the need to develop engaging content that works in social media is prompting some soul-searching among brands as to what their social personality should be.

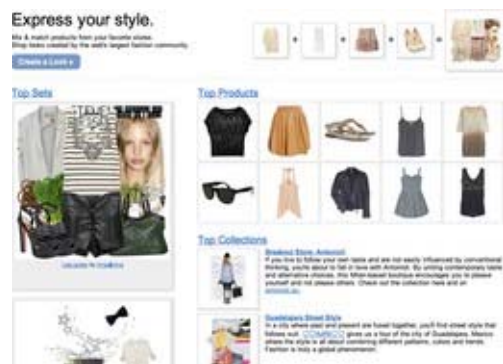
Contests that encourage users to create content around a brand are especially popular. The prizes and deadlines create a sense of urgency, while the content created can live online forever and spread virally.

For example, starting Saturday, Saks Fifth Avenue and Jimmy Choo will partner with fashion community Closet Couture on a series of in-store events and an online contest centered on the concept of styling, and having a wardrobe of Jimmy Choo shoes for every need. In five stores across the country, Closet Couture stylists will demonstrate how to style outfits for different occasions using a variety of brands and Jimmy Choo shoes. On Closet Couture, visitors can go to the virtual Saks and Jimmy Choo closets to style their own outfits using clothes from La Via 18, Diane von Furstenberg, Derek Lam and others to mix and match with the shoes. Jimmy Choo will choose three winners who will each receive three pairs of shoes. Saks and Closet Couture will publicize the campaign via local blogs, e-mails, Facebook and snail-mail invitations.

Closet Couture, which launched in October 2008, is a fashion social networking site where women can upload photos of their own clothes to a virtual closet, mix them with clothes from brands and retailers on a virtual mannequin, plan a wardrobe and get styling advice from other



Coutourious's web page.
Photo By Courtesy Photo



Polyvore's web page.
Photo By Courtesy Photo



The customer designed Coach tote.
Photo By: Courtesy Photo

members.

“The reason people like to shop is because it’s fun, and in the early days you were missing some of that online,” said Saks senior vice president of marketing Kimberly Grabel. “Social media is becoming increasingly important. I don’t know any one I would isolate, but it’s a very aggressive strategy for us: Affiliates, community sites, blogger outreach. All of that is adding up to great new sources for us for customers.”

French Connection is the first fashion brand to make use of the notorious Chatroulette as part of a humorous campaign aimed at men. The rapidly growing site randomly connects strangers around the globe for video chats, and has a reputation for a largely male and frequently unclothed audience. Only four months old, the Russian site reportedly has more than a million unique visitors a month.

Earlier this month, French Connection offered a gift certificate worth 250 pounds, or \$380 at current exchange, to the first man — later expanded to include women — who could prove he or she had set up a date with a woman on the site. The company received only about 30 entries, said French Connection head of e-commerce and digital marketing Jennifer Roebuck, but received a large amount of coverage in the press and more than 500 blogs.

The Chatroulette competition was just one of several tongue-in-cheek contests and posts to appear on the company’s Manifesto blog, which debuted in February. The most recent post informs men how to fold a

newspaper on the subway. The blog has been getting 5,000 to 10,000 daily visitors and was created by the Poke London agency, whose employees include veterans of the men’s hipster magazine Vice.

“French Connection is looking to develop their men’s wear business further, and this is one of our grassroots approaches and complements the brand advertising efforts,” said Roebuck. “Overall, our social media efforts are helping with traffic and sales. We have also seen an increased interest in our men’s wear; however, it is early days.”

Marc Jacobs is the first fashion brand — and one of the first brands of any sort — to have a page on Foursquare, a year-old Web and mobile community and game for exploring places. During New York Fashion Week, the company listed things to do that its employees do, such as ordering a pizza pie from Rivoli Pizza and checking out RSVP Gallery. The page is ongoing, and recent ideas have included tips for Paris during the shows and Chicago, where Jacobs opened a store in February. During fashion week, anyone who fanned the page and subsequently checked into Foursquare via mobile at any Marc Jacobs store in New York received a “Fashion Victim” badge and a gift with any purchase of \$10 or more. So far, there have been about 100 check-ins to most of the recommended venues, and the page has more than 1,500 fans.

As for Foodspotting, it’s focused on eats, but it’s easy to imagine someone developing a similar idea for fashion. Another unusual new site with potential to affect retailers is Blippy, which sends out Twitter-like feeds of purchases made on credit cards by its members.

In mid-April, Gap plans to introduce a microsite that will aggregate buzz from social sites around the Web about the top fashion trends it deems key for spring. The comments won’t necessarily all be about Gap products, said sources familiar with the company’s plans. (Gap did not return a call seeking comment.)

Not all fashion social network and community sites take off; some disappear and new ones launch all the time. In addition to the ones already mentioned, active sites include Looklet, MyStyleDiary, StyledOn, StyleIte, Iqons and Wardrobe Remix. A recent entrant is Couturious, which went live on Feb. 24. As at Closet Couture, the users “style” clothes on an image of a model. The site launched with six featured designers — Alice + Olivia, Charlotte Ronson, Cynthia Rowley, Tibi, Tory Burch and Yigal Azrouël — who sent in samples to be photographed from their spring collections. The site is part of a bigger network that belongs to Like.com, a visual search engine, and includes Weardrobe, a fashion community for outfit sharing.

“We’re really focusing on social media,” said Tibi designer Amy Smilovic, who said her business is up significantly.

"Couturous just came up in our search for different companies we could partner with to have innovative ways to speak with our customers."

Earlier this month, American Apparel published a book of photographs from the outfit sharing site Lookbook showing members of the community wearing outfits that include pieces from American Apparel. Even more intriguing, the retailer recently started publishing on the product pages on its own Web site photos submitted by customers of them wearing American Apparel items in a section called "Seen and Submitted." Some of the photos happen to be from Lookbook. So the physical book was a logical extension of an existing relationship.

The company has been an advertiser on Lookbook for some time, and there are more than 7,000 outfits on the site that incorporate American Apparel items. About 1,000 photos were generated when American Apparel held a contest on Lookbook for people to submit photos of themselves wearing American Apparel items. Many of the people featured in the Lookbook book are also prominent bloggers with large followings of their own.

"Every one of those outfits is sending something back to our Web store and our physical stores featuring that item, so that's pretty cool," said American Apparel head of online marketing Ryan Holiday. "When you stumble upon something like that you really have to explore it."

The company has also done contests with Chictopia and Polyvore, and sometimes sells or gives away new products as well, such as a lace unitard it offered to Chictopia users with 10,000 Chic reward points, thus guaranteeing its products will go to someone popular in the community.

Of all the many fashion social networking and community sites, Polyvore is one of the biggest. Many brands first heard of it when they noticed unusual amounts of traffic coming from the site.

"It's a huge traffic driver," said Bluefly style editor and content manager Nana Brew-Hammond.

More than 6 million visitors a month create, share and rate collages made out of online images of clothes, accessories, and beauty products. The site has only 14 full-time employees but so much content that 30,000 new sets are created each day. In February, the site had 1.8 million visitors in the U.S., according to ComScore Inc.

"We're really testing it to see what kind of traffic it will bring back to our site," said Ronit Weisberg, vice president of e-commerce and online advertising at Diane von Furstenburg. Even without the brand's involvement, a DVF shoe comes up in the top 10 shoes chosen by members. "That led me to go back and see how many shoes we bought," she said. "It is influencing our preorders."

Polyvore recently hired a new chief executive, former Google executive Sukhinder Singh Cassidy, to help grow the company and discover new revenue streams.

Many well-known brands have run contests on the site, and others such as Bluefly create their own sets. In November and December, Barneys New York ran a contest and gave away gift cards. In December, Coach Inc., ran a contest on Polyvore in which members were invited to create a holiday party collage using two Coach items. The company received more than 3,600 entries from 1,700 individuals.

A year earlier, the brand ran a design contest with Brickfish in which people were invited to submit an original design for a Coach tote. Coach produced the tote and threw a party for the winner in its Boston store.

"We look at the number of engagements," said David Duplantis, Coach's senior vice president of global Web and digital media. "Our primary objective in the social space is to drive brand engagements and store traffic as well as maximizing e-commerce opportunities." Coach knows the campaigns were effective anecdotally because customers would come into stores and say they had submitted an entry on Polyvore or wanted to see the winning tote in person. "We convert people in the store," he said. "Once they're there, they buy."

Online, search, e-mail and people typing in the URL are still the largest drivers of traffic to e-stores, but traffic from social sites is growing the fastest, he said.

"Facebook is the largest driver of traffic in the social space to our site," said Duplantis. "Polyvore is a meaningful amount of traffic. One of the benefits of Polyvore is it's a very qualified audience. They're actually coming to the site; they're relevant, and they can make a purchase."

Coach is using its Facebook page to presell new products to fans. It is mulling hosting its own social network and offering exclusive experiences or products to its most loyal customers.

Because of the demand it can generate, social media is having an effect on manufacturing and orders. Rebecca Minkoff, which hosted a blogging station during New York Fashion Week, has been responding to requests, creating exclusives and holding parties for various fashion communities such as the Purse Blog. When a blog or community picks up on a bag, it can have the same effect as when people see photos of a celebrity wearing an item.

"When we see trends like that, when we see enough bubbling and communication on a certain subject, we go back to retailers and say 'hey you should invest in that,'" said Minkoff. "We're leveraging that network of hundreds of bloggers we interact with now to provide them content. They've become like a TV channel and they have their subscribers, and if I can push that [back out] to my retailers, then that goes full circle."

Feedback from bloggers has also helped her adjust some designs. "It opens up your consumer voice a little bit more. It's good to know this strap was too long on a bag and I heard it from someone on a blog versus an editor who might not even know that," she said.

All the social media activity means brands increasingly have to adapt not only their advertising, but also how they act to suit the new reality.

"What's going on here of great consequence is the creation of a community of consumers," said Bill D'Arienzo, ceo of brand consulting firm WDA Marketing, who moderated a panel on social media Wednesday at FIT organized by the American Apparel & Footwear Association. "Brands must socialize with customers. This is a major, major shift. Traditional brand advertising is based on delivering a monologue. There is no feedback except to say you've received the message.

"It's all about relationship marketing," he said. "It requires humility and authenticity, which together engender trust. [Social media is causing] an evolutionary alteration of the brand's identity."

Brands are finding that they must think of something to say. In some cases, that means developing a whole online personality.

If a company has a passionate entrepreneur or well-known leader such as Tony Hsieh of Zappos or Tory Burch, it can build an identity around him or her, said Anne Green, president and chief operating officer of press relations firm CooperKatz & Company Inc. A company can tell a story, offer discounts, give a behind-the-scenes glimpse of its world, or provide inspiration.

The latter is a tack many fashion firms are taking in various ways, from Topshop's blog about exciting new things the staff has spotted, to artier projects.

Steven Alan recently started photographing and interviewing customers, and publishing the results on the Notes section of its Facebook page. Last month, Sam Shipley of Shipley & Halmos started posting a drawing a day on a blog called "Numerous Drawings."

"I'd been doing [the drawings] for a while. I thought, 'Why don't we scan them in and throw them online as a way to get people who follow our brand another idea of the other side of the creativity that we do?'" said Shipley.

Personal fashion blogs are thought to provide inspiration to real women. And a company's own blog typically boosts search engine rankings for free. Twitter is often used for news and discounts, while Facebook is emerging as the favorite for conversations. At Bluefly, for example, the company created weeks of content about celebrity-inspired dressing during awards season. On its Facebook page, it engaged customers in conversations about red carpet bombs and bombshells.

The surge in user-generated content around brands offers a growing alternative to online display advertising.

"The days of pushing it out there and telling the customer who you are may be coming to an end," said Tory Burch chief marketing officer Miki Berardelli. "I do feel these new ways of advertising are more successful and more engaging and possibly more cost effective."