

Some Retailers Stretch To Fit You In

by Jillian Kramer

Losing a dress size doesn't necessarily make you any smaller.

Instead, it's a nasty trick the clothing industry is playing, an effort to hide from women of the world how big they really are. It's called vanity sizing - aka "the devil" to all female shoppers - where clothiers cut fabric large but label the finished product a size, or sizes, smaller than it ought to be.

Voila, women have lost weight without shedding pounds and they cheerfully unload the poundage in their purses to the saleswoman who, by the way, just loved them in that color.

WORTH YOUR WEIGHT

According to sources such as the Boston Globe and Consumer Reports, vanity sizing is alive and well, and more common and profitable than ever before. In a society where waistlines are ever expanding, it simply makes sense to prey on women's vanity, making them think they're smaller than they are and encouraging them to buy more clothes because of it.

"Over 60 percent of Americans are overweight," said Sarah Leffler, a registered dietitian at Aultman Weight Management. The most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, reported in 2000, supports Leffler's assessment. It indicates that more than 64 percent of U.S. adults are overweight or obese, a 14 percent increase from the same survey in 1994, and a 36 percent increase from 1980.

"There's no average (person) anymore," Leffler said, and neither are there average, standardized sizes.

Standardized sizes were created in the 1940s. The Department of Commerce officially withdrew its commercial standard for sizing in 1983 because clothiers vastly ignored its specifications. In other words, all size eights aren't really size eights, said Tim Gunn, chairman of the department of fashion design at Parsons School of Design in New York.

"Why is a Donna Karan Collection dress (about \$7,500) in a size eight an entirely different fit than a DKNY dress (about \$350) in the same size?" Gunn asked.

"Because sizing has changed at the lower end of the price-scale and remained the same as 40 years ago in the higher end. ... Retailers are responding to the expanding girth of the American consumer and they don't want that consumer to walk out of a dressing room completely dejected because they thought they were a size eight and in fact they're a 12. So, the DKNY size eight is really an old-world size 10 or 12."

Gunn demonstrated this two years ago on a CBS "Sunday Morning" segment. He took three size eight dresses to the show and each was manufactured 10 years apart: 1984, 1994, and 2004. The difference in the waist measurement alone was a full 2 inches - in 1984 the waist was 25.5 inches and in 2004 it was 27.5 inches.

"Imagine the potential consequence of the consumer who is confronted with the truth about her size. That is, that she's not the size 10 that she thought she was, but she's actually a size 18," Gunn said. "The retail world fears that this consumer would flee from the store empty-handed and head to the diet section of the supermarket. It could take months for that consumer to return to the store."

Gunn continued, "Virtually all of the mass market companies - inexpensive to bridge - have bought into the vanity sizing scheme, because their customer base is broad, widespread, and represents most of America."

Though it seems like there's no escape, Leffler leaves us with some healthy advice.

Swallow it with a grain of salt.

"Forget clothes," she said. Concentrate on your health and well-being."
Sizing up the facts

Though it's unusually small, my 102-pound body isn't shrinking - and perhaps neither is yours.

I found this out during an informal study at the mall to test the theory of vanity sizing for myself. With two friends by my side - Amanda and Katrina - we wandered a suburban mall in search of clothes that fit us.

We began at Charlotte Russe. Amanda picked up a pair of jeans in a size seven and squeezed into them.

"That's why I like The Limited," she yelled over the wall. "I'm a size four there!" Katrina couldn't find sizes large enough for her. And I tried on small shirts that fit just fine.

At Ann Taylor Loft, as we scoured the racks for clothes, a shopper confronted a saleswoman.

"I can't find my size," she said.

"Oh, that's because when you go from our petite line to our regular line, you go down a size," the saleswoman replied.

We smirked and headed to the dressing room.

Katrina swam in a size 14 shirt. "I usually wear a size 16 or 18," she said and rechecked the tag.

I fell out of a size zero pair of pants and could barely keep up an XS shirt. Amanda fit into a medium shirt.

At Express - the home of sizes XS, XXS, and XXXS - I was told by the sales associate that the store does not carry a size larger than a 12. By those standards, Marilyn Monroe would be on the fat end of the Express scale; she wore a size 12 throughout her career.

At Gap, Amanda's size seven jeans were falling off and I looked like a munchkin in a size zero jacket. Katrina fit comfortably into a large shirt.

The Limited proved the concept of vanity sizing beyond question. While Katrina fit into a large shirt, Amanda tried on a size six pair of jeans, but admitted she still had some room; a small shirt was the perfect size for her.

I tried on a pair of size zero pants. Disgustingly, I was able to take them off without unzipping or unbuttoning them. And if a size zero is too big for me, there's no hope for womankind in the fashion world.

Some Retailers Stretch To Fit You In by Jillian Kramer