

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

April 19, 2007

AS YOU LIKE IT

By CLOE CABRERA The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA - For far too long, consumers have sat idly by while designers dictated the style and color of their clothing, shoes and accessories.

You love the purse, but that color! And those sneakers; why not a pair with your own initials on them?

Unless you had plenty to spend, though, tailor-made had no place in your closet.

Times have changed.

Jeans custom-fit to your derriere, sneakers in your favorite mellow yellow and one-of-a-kind handbags - they're all available, and at prices that won't make you sacrifice that weekly manicure. Products for shoppers who want to stand out are part of a growing trend in retail, analysts say.

"Everybody thinks they can make a salad better than a restaurant," says Ellen Davis, spokeswoman for the National Retail Federation. "Everyone thinks they can design something better than the designer. Consumers have gotten very used to customizing things in their lives. Clothing is the next step."

Surprisingly, these special-order products cost about what you would pay for the mass-produced versions.

"The technology has gotten much better," Davis says. "And retailers know consumers don't want to pay a lot to customize something. They can now produce individual merchandise without breaking the bank."

B's Purses allows women to choose the style, fabric, inside lining, strap construction, handle hardware and monogram for a bag that suits their personality.

Online shoppers can pick from 45 fabrics, which change every season.

Bags range from \$45 to \$145, depending on the style.

The company has sold more than 300,000 customized bags since it launched in 2004.

"It's the No. 1 accessory out there," says Lisa Henderson, who co-founded B's with two friends. "When 85 percent of shoppers are women and you take the No. 1 accessory sold, it's a perfect match."

Nike is just doing it, too. NIKEiD.com allows shoppers to design their dream sneakers from home.

Nike sneaker prices average about \$100. For \$10 to \$20 more, customers can choose every aspect of their shoe, from the type of soles to the colors of the shoestrings and ubiquitous swoosh symbol.

The site receives more than 250,000 visits a week. Nike also has given the power of personalization to performance apparel, bags and sport watches and plans to offer the service to Nike styles including the Air 180 and Nike Free, says Erica Pedreguera, a manager in Nike's Southern regional sales office.

Not in the mood for sneakers? Women can hike over to shoesUSA.com and build what they need. Choose a category: heels, wedges, platforms, boots, clogs or bridals. Within each, you'll find many style options, each of which can be customized. Most offer a choice of color, material, heel and insole, as well as size and width.

If you don't see an option you like, the company takes special requests via e-mail.

Prices start at about \$119; most shoes cost \$169 and up.

Clothing, too, is now all about choices. At the Lands' End site, you can turn your favorite Original Oxford into a snappy Pink Quartz blouse with contrasting collar, French cuffs and a breast pocket - monogrammed.

Chinos, trousers and swimwear are also available for customizing.

Women's blouses average around \$70, while a man's solid dress shirt averages about \$65.

Perhaps best of all - for those of us who really, really love our jeans and want them to last forever - is makeyourownjeans.com.

Here, those favorite frayed denims can be cloned. Customers just send their jeans to the company's factory and have a pair made to the same measurements for about the price of an average pair of jeans.

If you don't have a preferred pair, they'll create one for you. Follow the measuring guide and pick the fabric, finish and features of the jeans, including personalized embroidery. Jeans average about \$45.

For a few more dollars, customize the pocket style or add a patch. The site also offers tweakable shirts, corduroys and trousers.

Most of these custom products can be delivered to you in about three weeks. And the companies keep a record of what you've designed, so reordering is easy.

ON THE WEB

B's Purses: www.bspurses.com/

Nike: NIKEiD.com

Lands' End: landsend.com

Harryfashion: makeyourownjeans.com

Shoes USA: shoesUSA.com