

**VALUE ADDED** Custom orders at no extra cost is one way Elizabeth Charles (right), wins repeat business from her customers.

# CheckOut

A smart buyer's guide to styles, shops, sales and services



CHECK OUT

## Traffic control

Stores are devising ever more interesting ways to keep customers coming through their doors **By Kelly McMasters** Photographs by **Shaniqwa Jarvis**

**B**loomberg may keep telling us the economy is recovering, but let's face it: Times are still tough. Even those of us making decent salaries can't help but feel cash-poor when a martini can set us back \$15. Stores are feeling the pinch too. The recent closings of retail darlings such as Canal Jeans, Paul & Joe and others serve as cautionary tales for the rest, urging them to ensure that when customers do spend their dough, they're spending it with them. One way for shops to steer spenders through their doors is a souped-up version of the gift-with-purchase tactic—in which the role of free lipstick is played by the likes of Duxiana's private napping chambers or by water bowls for thirsty lapdogs at Rebecca Taylor. So what if it's a classic retail move? These dangled perks can be enough to convince us to patronize these amenity-rife shops.

"We want the customer to feel like she is in her own apartment or at a salon," says Malia Mills, owner of the **Malia Mills** swimwear boutiques (199 Mulberry St between Kenmare and Spring Sts; 212-625-2311; and 960 Madison Ave between 75th and 76th Sts, second floor; 212-517-7485). At your own home you might walk around in your bathing suit. In a store, however, where fluorescent lights shine on your winter-white flesh, few women would emerge from a fitting room without first getting fully redressed. Mills knows this pain, so she's provided long, luxurious terry-cloth robes and flip-flops in each fitting room. "Swimwear is such an emotional purchase for women," Mills says. "It is a category where women deserve a lot of attention and beautiful lighting, and the knowledge that they won't have to run around searching for sizes." Not only does Mills provide a safe, relaxing environment for the oft-traumatic experience of suit

shopping, she hosts monthly promotional parties where frequent shoppers get together over wine and finger foods. "They can certainly make purchases and try suits on during these nights, but that is not the intent of the party. It is just an opportunity for a group of interesting women to come and meet and talk to one another," Mills says. Though we're sure she wouldn't mind selling a bikini or two.

**Henri Bendel** (712 Fifth Ave between 55th and 56th Sts; 212-247-1100) also uses impressive customer service as a way to keep spenders coming back. In lieu of a personal-shopper program, all Bendel salespeople act as personal stylists. Each one has a client book, and customers are encouraged to return to the same associate on each visit. Though you can't reserve a specific time with an associate, you also don't have to pay an additional personal-shopping expense. Along with this service, Bendel's hosts monthly events.

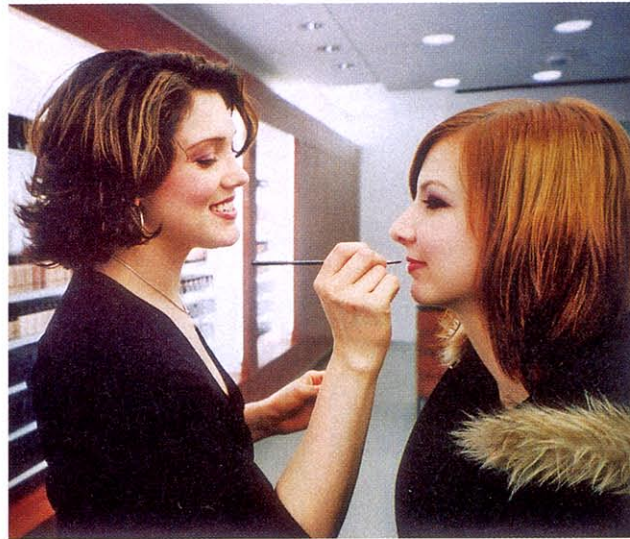
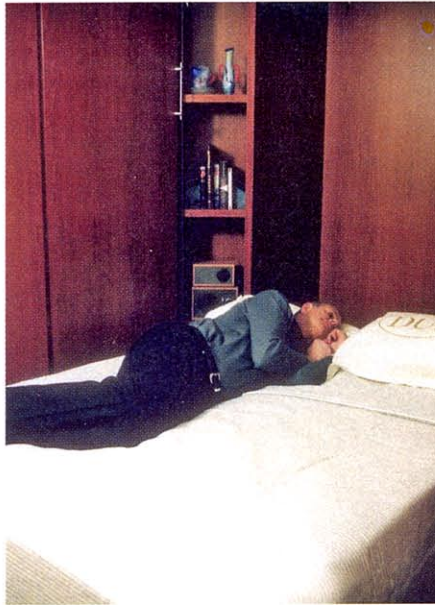
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While regular customers receive invitations, these shindigs are open to the public. Most soirees consist of cocktails, entertainment and gift bags; past perks have included complimentary spa treatments. One party in October featured FAL designer Jeffrey Grubb personalizing his Madonna T-shirts (think glitter nose rings on the pop diva's image). Half of the proceeds that evening went to an AIDS-prevention non-profit. Aligning with a charity is a popular strategy for traffic-building events. Stores, designers and charities make money, and customers can feel good about spending it.

Rather than hog all the hosting duties, **M.A.C Cosmetics** (113 Spring St between Mercer and Greene Sts; 212-334-4641) allows customers to use its retail space to host fetes of their own. Those who want to throw an unusual birthday or bachelorette party, for example, can take over the store for a couple of hours after closing, when M.A.C associates will entertain guests with makeovers or seminars on color application. There is a fee, of course, though when it comes to space rental, this one is a pretty good deal. The store can be booked based on the promise of a certain number of parties and purchases; a dozen guests who'll spend \$50 each would secure the space. The hostess has the option to comp her guests with prepaid gift certificates for part or all of the guaranteed amount, or she can ask her invitees to buy their own "party favors." Catering, though not included, is welcome. M.A.C isn't just stuck on bringing customers through its doors, though; the retailer will gladly send cosmetics artists to companies or associations to give off-site seminars (they were recently booked at a Brooklyn synagogue). A company hosting a cosmetics party for its workers is a nice gesture, but M.A.C makes out on the deal too. As with in-store parties, a certain dollar amount of product must be purchased.

Like Malia Mills, **Rebecca Taylor**, who will open her first U.S. flagship in Nolita (260 Mott St between Houston and Prince Sts; no phone) in mid-March, will make customer-comfort her strategy. For many in the chic set, a shopping spree can be cut short when their tiny terriers get restless. But the 400-square-foot courtyard behind Taylor's store will serve as a makeshift dog run for patrons' pooches, so women can shop unfettered by their furry friends. French doors in a glass wall will open to the rovers' range, where water and food will be available to canine clientele. On warmer days, shoppers can join their four-footed friends out back for a cool drink.

At recently opened **Elizabeth Charles** in the Meatpacking District (639 1/2 Hudson St between Horatio and Gansevoort Sts; 212-243-3201), the bait of choice is parties. Four times the size of Charles's previous space, the new location allows owner Elizabeth Charles to host events where her clients can mingle with the Australian and New Zealand designers of the store's wares. In addition to offering drinks and hors d'oeuvres, Charles hopes to keep cus-



**BAIT SHOP** Napping chambers at Duxiana (top), makeover parties at M.A.C (above) and luxe terry-cloth robes at Malia Mills (below) are ways boutiques aim to build their clientele.



tomers loyal with previews of collections and discounts on featured designers' clothes. A 10 percent discount is given to clients who refer friends to the store, proving that more is merrier for both Charles and her clients. The retailer also caters to special requests. "Gretchen Mol recently came in and needed a jacket in a smaller size with a longer sleeve," Charles says. "In a week and a half we had the jacket for her, because the designers I stock are flexible; one-offs are definitely something they can handle." Charles says Mol didn't receive star treatment—anyone can special order an item at no additional cost, save shipping.

It isn't just purveyors of small goods that know special attention can yield financial gains. Ultramodern furniture store **Troy** (138 Greene St between Houston and Prince Sts; 212-941-4777) hopes to create more fans of its sleek, modular line of house accoutrements by expanding its offerings, and range of services, which will include free, no-obligation interior-design consultations. Interior designers can show you how to turn your dinky studio into the space of your dreams. A designer will visit your space, which you'll presumably fill with the store's furniture, and spend an hour or so measuring and discussing options and goals. "Our furniture is really perfect for this technology," says owner Troy Halterman. "Every sofa comes in 150 fabric options and 25 configurations, allowing our sofas to turn corners if they need to. We have the ability to tailor it to whatever the customer needs." Within two weeks of the consultation, you'll have three computer-generated options (essentially a list of things to buy from Troy) personalized for your space.

Buying a mattress is always an awkward proposition—you want to test it out, but how can you relax when curling up in the middle of a sales floor? **Duxiana Downtown** (921 Broadway at 21st St; 212-777-0771) understands this dilemma, and the Swedish bedding company is wagering that once customers are able to spend some quality time on one of its ultraluxe mattresses, they'll insist on having a carbon copy at home. Opened last spring, the company's flagship store is outfitted with two sleep chambers where prospective purchasers can try out the hand-constructed mattresses—for up to three hours. To test-drive the goods, shoppers are advised to call on weekends to reserve one of the mini hotel rooms (if it's slow, even walk-ins can request a chamber). Each nook is furnished with fresh Egyptian-cotton linens, pillows, dimmable lights and a private sound system to lull customers to sleep. "It is a little strange to try out beds in public," says Stephen Pino, sales manager of Duxiana. "Within the sleep chambers, couples can discuss their options privately and know what the bed would be like fully outfitted the way it would be in their home." There is absolutely no obligation to buy, but Pino says the sleep chambers are very effective sales tools. This is a business, after all. ■

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