

Q&A

Digitalization of fashion has a two-sided effect from buyers' perspective

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Mary Jane Denzer boutique within The Ritz-Carlton

By JEN KING

In the past decade the face of retail has changed course significantly with the introduction of in-store digital touch points and the advances of ecommerce.

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Luxury Daily

During more than 35 years in the luxury retail industry, Mary Jane Denzer, who operates a boutique within The Ritz-Carlton in White Plains, NY, has built her business along with consumers' changing affinities, hemlines and shopping behavior. Ms. Denzer's success can be measured by her ability to succeed despite changing expectations in the retail space as well as the rise of online couture.

"My feelings on digitalization and commerce are very mixed," said Mary Jane Denzer, founder of [Mary Jane Denzer](#), White Plains, NY.

"The fact that the runway shows are up on the Internet immediately has a two-sided effect," she said. "For me as a buyer, it keeps me in the loop of what I would want to look at and for the consumer presents a picture of what she'd like to buy.

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cull each collection I buy to make sure to select the perfect mix for my store. I think of myself as the professional go between for the designer and the consumer."

In this Q&A, Ms. Denzer discusses her career beginnings with a holiday shop in department store Saks Fifth Avenue's White Plains, NY location, how the role of a retailer has changed and what she has planned next.



Mary Jane Denzer with Bodhi

Here is the dialogue:

How did you begin your business?

I was working at Bergdorf Goodman and a customer of mine came in one day and told me her husband who was in the construction business had just completed a small building in Mamaroneck, NY.

She wanted to open a women's specialty shop but as a social worker, she knew nothing about retailing. If I would run the store, do all the buying, merchandising and bring all my clients, I would be a 50 percent owner.

We settled with my getting 51 percent of the deal. The store opened in 1979 as Denzer Moran.

How has the luxury consumer changed since you first opened?

The luxury consumer was a wardrobe shopper. Every season was a new fashion expression and she had to stay at the top of her game. There were important meetings to dress for, luncheons to attend, cocktail and dinner parties every weekend and charity balls galore.

There was the daytime wardrobe of sporty jackets and pants, cashmere sweaters and stunning scarves. Accessories were important to pull it all together so necklaces, brooches and bracelets needed to be the perfect coordinates.

A well-dressed woman changed her handbag and her shoes with every outfit. Suits with skirts and pants were stylish daywear for work and corporate dressing had rules.

Dresses and cocktail suits were the norm for after five entertainment, and one always dressed to dine in stylish restaurants and for theater. The well-dressed woman had a line-up of cocktail clothes in her wardrobe every season and the little black dress was a necessity. Her pearls went everywhere and the diamonds came out whenever the

invitation read "black tie."

Can you tell me about your experience at Saks in the 70s when you first opened your holiday shop?

I was asked to come to Saks in White Plains for the holiday season and open a boutique for gift buying. I had the run of the store to choose from as well as the Fifth Avenue store.

This became a luxury gem of a shop-within-a-shop and I filled it with fine jewelry, handbags, shoes and everything beautiful. It inspired ideas and was so successful; we kept it running long after the holidays were over.

Men shopped for their wives, waiters passed drinks and hors d'oeuvres and one particular night we kept the store open until 11:00pm for a gentleman who spent \$100,000.



Interior of the Mary Jane Denzer boutique

What attracted you to your bricks-and-mortar location in White Plains? Did you ever consider relocating the boutique to Manhattan?

White Plains was a better location for a shop than Mamaroneck and after a year of Denzer Moran we broke up the partnership and I moved to the East Post Road to my own Mary Jane Denzer store.

Of course I would have loved to be in Manhattan, but I had four children growing up and being a good mom was very important to me. I was still juggling career and motherhood and chose that path.

What does Ritz-Carlton offer that differed from your own storefront?

I had relocated from the East Post Road to the corner of Maple and Mamaroneck Avenue in 1996, and after 20 years it was time to move on.

The city of White Plains was changing all the time and the Ritz-Carlton complex gave the city a whole new face. I felt the luxury was on the other side of town, and we are a luxury business. We had a lot to offer the Ritz and they had the same for us. I think we are a perfect combination.

What are your feelings about the digitalization of fashion and retail in terms of commerce, content and awareness building?

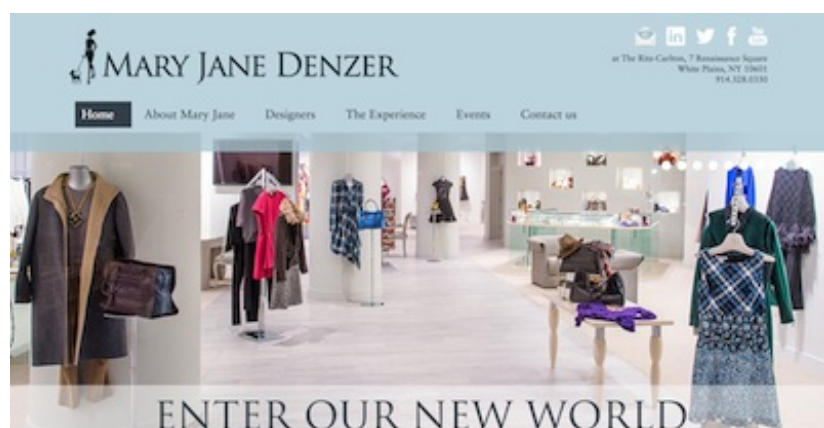
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I need to go to see each collection and carefully examine each garment for weight, quality, style, workmanship, fabrication and fit. Pictures do not tell a complete story. I then cull each collection I buy to make sure to select the perfect mix for my store. I think of myself as the professional go between for the designer and the consumer.

The consumer, unless she has huge experience, does not always have the perfect eye for herself. She may love a dress but it may not be the right one for many reasons of which she is unaware.

We look at many factors at a woman in her dress such as her posture, her walk, her figure, front and side view, the color, the style and the way it falls on her body. These are our criteria for selecting and a customer's comfort zone is obvious to us with the answers to these questions.



Mary Jane Denzer Web site

Digital pictures are bad because the wrong angle shot can be very distorting. A selfie is the sure loss of a sale. Women have gotten into the habit of taking a picture of every dress they try and sending them out for critique to their family and friends. Are they capable of making the right decisions? I think the professionals in a store are far more trustworthy.

There are both good and bad sides to the exposure the Internet gives to the consumer. I think there is nothing better than walking into a beautiful store that has done all the choosing for you, that is, if the buy is done by someone with great taste. Shopping has to be fun and so many women find it burdensome.

It's easy to click on to Style.com and choose ones' dress from the runway - but only if one has the eye. There is no thrill of touching the fabric, seeing the true colors and workmanship, and best of all, trying it on with a true professional at your side.

Of course shopping online is so easy, but perfect tailoring is what makes clothes look great. An expert alterations department is key. Unfortunately, they haven't figured that one out yet.

You have expanded your role as store owner to designer – what attracted you to this career shift?

I have not made a career shift, but only added to what we are able to do for our customers.

Designer clothes often go up to a size 12 and not everyone can fit in them. I have developed some designers who work on a "made-to-measure" basis and we work together to create the perfect look for the customer.

Often a woman is not all one size so we address that with the right style for her. Every single client is an individual and analyzing and creating the look for her is our goal.

Your store offers bespoke tailoring on-site – why is this important and how does it craft the luxury experience?

There are many talented designers that will cut to measure for the customer who cannot fit in designer clothes. The designer cut, especially from Europe, is very small and the American woman is not always that small.

She needs to dress as well and so we offer many styles that will be made to measure. This is accomplished by an experienced fitter taking all measurements, often having the designer making a muslin pattern to fit the customer and then understanding the perfect tailoring on the finished garment.

The fact that over a certain age women want specifics such a certain neckline, sleeves or a flared skirt, gives them the flexibility to have exactly what they want and need.



Gowns hanging in the Mary Jane Denzer boutique

As someone who has “seen it all,” which brands do you think will be the next big thing in luxury fashion?

The most exciting part of my job is to see a new style that I have never seen before and that becomes hard after so many years in this business.

A good designer is a creator and not a copier and there lies the problems with most collections. Either the designer with a name for years gets repetitive and dull and is living on his laurels and is not designing for the 21st century and is unaware that women change with new eras and demand modern looks or had just gotten burned out.

I am constantly on the search for new, fresh talent and do not hesitate to chance a buy from a designer whose talent I recognize.

There is hardly a famous name that has not hung in my store. My latest goal is to find new creators to boost to the top.

What will you do next?

My next venture will be to find just the right business partner or potential buyer for the store to take it to the next level.

With this new location and our unique business model, we have a large and loyal customer base. This makes us a very attractive offering for someone looking to build and expand in the growing luxury market.

Final Take

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