

RETAIL

Amazon's Prime Wardrobe adds new layer of disruption for retailers

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Amazon Prime Wardrobe allows consumers to try on more than 1 million items. Image credit: Amazon

By JEN KING

Online retail giant Amazon is continuing to undercut the traditional bricks-and-mortar model with the introduction of a try-before-you-buy service.

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Amazon's latest disruption is dubbed Prime Wardrobe and is currently in BETA testing and available only to Prime customers that the retailer has selected to pilot the program. During an era where traditional department stores are facing declining sales and consumer disinterest, Amazon has only upped the ante on its fashion division's happenings and service programs.

"Amazon is cherry picking from the best iterations of novel retail models offered today, and blending them uniquely to offer an exciting new service," said Laura Sossong, manager at [Boston Retail Partners](#), Boston.

"Bricks-and-mortar retailers will continue to face challenges launching similar large-scale initiatives based on limited capital and resources, persistent overhead costs and distribution challenges with cost and efficiency," she said. "Amazon has already mastered these elements."

Ms. Sossong is not affiliated with Amazon, but agreed to comment as an industry expert. [Amazon](#) was reached for comment.

At home trials

Similar to a trunk service, Amazon's Prime Wardrobe sends Prime subscribers a box filled with clothes. The service is free for Prime members and does not include a styling fee, a common add-on for similar services.

Anything within the box that does not fit the consumer's personal style or body type can be returned to Amazon free of charge. The consumer is only charged for the pieces she keeps.



Amazon Prime Wardrobe is currently in BETA testing, but could prove disruptive for retailers. Image credit: Amazon

Instead of a stylist making choices to fill the box, Prime consumers can handpick clothing, shoes and accessories from more than 1 million items in the women's, men's, children and baby sections on Amazon. Brands include Calvin Klein, Levi's, Adidas, Timex, Theory, Hugo Boss, Lacoste, J Brand and others.

As added incentive to keep clothing, Amazon offers a 10 percent discount for three to four pieces or 20 percent off for five items or more. A Prime Wardrobe box can include up to 15 pieces of apparel.

After seven days, if the consumer opts to not keep particular items of clothing, she can put the pieces back in the Prime Wardrobe shipment box. Each box includes a prepaid return shipping label and can be dropped off at a local UPS office or be picked up from the consumer's home for free.

Amazon has not yet shared if the service will evolve beyond BETA testing, but consumers can sign up for a notification for the official launch.

One of consumers' qualms with online shopping is concerns of fit, feel and quality of clothing purchased. Dealing with returns can be annoying, especially if return shipping is not complimentary, but these ecommerce anxieties are avoided with Prime Wardrobe.

Amazon Fashion's Introducing Prime Wardrobe

Although prepaid return shipping is commonplace amongst luxury retailers, the try-before-you-buy model has not yet been adapted by those in the sector. But, there are exceptions.

For example, Nordstrom purchased men's apparel and accessories service Trunk Club in 2014.

Trunk Club employs a staff of personal stylists to select fashions from more than 50 high-end brands for its members based on personal profiles. The client keeps what he likes and returns the rest with a prepaid shipping label. ([see story](#)),

Also, Net-A-Porter and Mr Porter's soon-to-launch "Extremely Important People" option will allow its high-spending clients to try on their newly purchased merchandise while the delivery person waits, streamlining the return process. The online retailers plan to launch EIP in September ([see story](#)).

"Evolving with the changing expectations and whims of the market will be vital to survive in the future of retail," BRP's Ms. Sossong said.

"Online players should follow Amazon's cue in exploring new models and evolving their offerings to maintain relevance with today's capricious consumer," she said.

Virtual stylists

Amazon's recent push into the fashion sector also includes updates to its virtual assistant Alexa via the Amazon Echo device.

Amazon's Style Check feature on the Echo Look application uses machine learning and artificial intelligence to suggest outfit advice based on the user's photo.

The app provides an overall outfit rating but also suggest items in the future, which can be a huge benefit to brand and retail partners. This will also allow marketers to gain even more insight on consumers and their behavior ([see story](#)).

"Amazon consumers are discount driven and have come to expect easy, fast access to desired product," BRP's Ms.

Sossong said. "By offering volume discounts, return shipping, no styling fee and free access to Prime users, this BETA should certainly compel purchases and willingness to try the service.

"At a minimum, it will provide Amazon with valuable performance data to gauge traction and responsiveness to avant-garde business models, allowing them to proactively plan for future innovation," she said.

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