

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

How to fix shoppers' fashion fatigue

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Athleisure and yogawear retailer Lululemon has mastered the art of experiential retail: its store staff are styled as educators, not sales associates. The shop floor is also sprinkled with uplifting imagery, inspiring messaging and eye-catching merchandising. Image credit: Lululemon

By [Pamela N. Danziger](#)

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We have all seen the headlines: "Low prices aren't fun anymore consumers have reached peak happiness with clothing purchases," on [CNBC](#) and "The retail apocalypse' is an apparel apocalypse," on [Retail Dive](#).

After looking around the industry and studying the research and analyst reports, I find the conclusion unequivocal. American consumers are over their love affair with fashion. The fashion industry is on the ropes.

Rather than rehash the statistics to support those headlines, I turned to 10 experts in the fashion business to gather ideas to help fix American shoppers' fashion fatigue. Here are their ideas:

Bring back service

"I just gave a talk to an audience of 350 people. I asked for a show of hands for those who had a fabulous brick-and-mortar retail experience in the last six months. Not a single person put up their hand. That is terrifying.

"The in-store experience is so bad. Where are the knowledgeable salespeople who put service first? Salespeople today don't care, and they don't know the stock that is there. They are on their phones or chatting with other salespeople. I find myself being almost apologetic when I approach a salesperson on the floor, which is really pathetic to say.

"Buying online takes all that friction out. What are brick-and-mortar stores doing to give us a better experience? For example, I can customize a dress online, picking the sleeves I want, the color and the length. But I can't do that in the store.

"Every single facet of the consumers' life is going in the direction of the technology lifestyle. But when you go to the store to buy a dress, it is like 1980 all over again, but without any service."

[Karen Young](#), The Young Group and Fashion Institute of Technology

Break fashion's promotional addiction

"The data shows that on a dollar basis, consumer spending on fashion is decreasing. But if you dig deeper into the

data, the volume on a unit basis has not significantly changed. For whatever period that you look at, people are still buying the same number of pieces.

"But what has happened are sales and promotions have become like an addictive drug for retailers. It's made consumers expect to buy everything on sale at 30 percent or 40 percent off the list price. It's created a discount mindset in consumers, who apply the money saved to other areas, like experiences or consumer electronics.

"Just cost-cutting to enable more discounts is not a long-term strategy. Fashion retailers need to change the dynamic. They need to look at the value to the customer and the brand promise, then work backwards toward pricing, product and assortment."

David Brown, Alvarez & Marsal

Pivot to the next-generations' values

"Millennials and Gen Z have demonstrated increased interest in collaborative consumption (Rent the Runway, Bag Borrow or Steal), resale goods (Poshmark, The RealReal) and thrifting. Other considerations in purchasing decisions made by these digital natives are sustainability and social responsibility.

"The younger shoppers place higher value on the values that brands support. For millennials and Gen Z, the value goes beyond trading a dollar for products. It needs to include a social contribution. These consumers want to invest in brands that practice sustainability or contribute to the betterment of society.

"To create sustainable competitive advantages, fashion brands should implement strategic initiatives that clearly demonstrate corporate social responsibility, create a compelling and differentiated product (like LVMH x Rihanna partnership), and develop second-hand initiatives which would promote reuse."

Shelley E. Kohan, Fashion Institute of Technology

Get the fit right

"In fashion categories that are doing well, like outerwear and athleisure, brands are doing a better job of fixing the fit model. European retail is doing better getting the fit right compared with North American retailers. We need one standard fit model.

"And the fit model needs to allow for how body types are evolving. Some brands are doing body type studies and building clothes that actually fit better based on real human beings, not just using algorithmic scaling.

"Other brands are offering custom made to your measurements. It seems like I get a couple of emails a day from shirt companies that do a nice job with technical fabrics and better fitting shirts. But go to Macy's or Nordstrom and it's all standard off the rack."

David Brown, Alvarez & Marsal

Leadership leads to long-term profitability

"The developed economies have markets saturated with product, especially when it comes to fashion.

"For some customers, clothing is simply a necessity, but many others shop for fashion to express themselves, to enhance their image and to feel more confident. They are looking for superior quality that lasts longer.

"The challenge comes down to educating the consumer and shifting them towards better-made, more expensive items. That takes leadership. It has to come from bold leaders in the industry.

"Companies must think long term, from 'me now' to 'us later,' and shift from a fast-fashion, fast-profitability model to a better-fashion, better-profit one.

"Companies have to know where they stand and what they stand for. Leaders know this and they are coming from new companies and new brands. The established ones find it harder to change because they have a 'we've always done it this way' mentality."

Andrea Rinker, Next Wave Management

Investment dressing for business success

"We've had our fill of fast-fashion and stuffing our closets full. Now we want to slim down, curate our closets and give stuff away, and only keep a core wardrobe that represents an investment, rather than more consumption.

"We are being more discerning about what new items we are bringing in. It's been a dramatic trend over the last 20 years.

"If you are going to spend \$50, would you rather buy one high-quality \$50 T-shirt or five \$10 ones? Quality is more expensive."

David Brown, Alvarez & Marsal

Rent rather than sell

"The development and expansion of the fashion rental membership programs accessible through Web sites and apps is quite brilliant in the age of everyone is an Instagram model.' Today you can't be seen in the same outfit twice.

"Depending on your taste level and budget, you can now pay a monthly fee to receive a new outfit to rent, not to own and pay as little for the privilege as \$49 for Gwynnie Bee, \$88 for Nuuly or \$159 for Rent The Runway Unlimited.

"Retailers are getting into it too, like Infinite Style by Ann Taylor and American Eagle Style Drop.

:For \$149 Bloomingdale's My List' rental program includes up to 10 items, free shipping, free returns, free dry-cleaning and the ability to create your own online closet. Return it after you've worn it, or keep it and get charged.

"There's something exciting about seeing a box at your front door, especially if it's new trends coming to you every month. The sustainability aspect appeals to the younger customer, while being able to wear and return the latest trends from emerging designers."

Geri Corrigan, NaveaStyle

Better dressing rooms for more sales

"Research has found that if a shopper gets into a dressing room they are almost seven times more likely to buy something than if they just browse the sales floor. And they are also much less likely to return purchases.

"But look at the average store dressing room. I can't think of a bigger disincentive to try something on, between the lighting, the lack of privacy and if you have to get another size, you have to get dressed again and maybe lose your place.

"Back when my mother and I shopped, there would be a salesperson outside the dressing room door to get you what you needed.

"Millennials get around this simply by ordering a dozen outfits online, then trying them on in the privacy of their home, maybe even taking pictures so their friends can vote on what to keep.

"All the rest, though, gets returned and that costs retailers a lot of money. Why don't retailers invest that instead into making the dressing room a place where shoppers want to go and hang out with their friends?"

Karen Young, The Young Group and Fashion Institute of Technology

Bring in new blood with new ideas

"Many of the leaders in successful new fashion startups come from other industries.

"For a long time, we have seen leaders and management that grew up in brick-and-mortar and the wholesale/retail environment. But we are seeing a changing of the guard who are disrupting the industry.

"Take the dramatic enhancements through new technical fabrication. Years ago, you wouldn't buy a polyester outfit. But now I look in my closet, and I have a tremendous amount of synthetic fabrics that provide amazing comfort, are easy to take care of and are very high quality.

"Fashion companies need to look for people that come from tech backgrounds or have evolved in some other consumer industry that have been disrupted alongside fashion. They understand the total consumer dynamics and have experience with new technologies and new solutions."

David Brown, Alvarez & Marsal

More meaning creates more value

"Brands cannot sacrifice their long-term value for short-term gains and call it growth. This is an illusion of growth

that leads to a steady demise and exploitation of future resources to fuel our ever-increasing demands in the now.

"It's funny how much we are focused on maximizing profit today, yet we don't seem to understand that the most sustainable and optimal way of making this short-term profit is by generating long-term value.

"Effectiveness and efficiency are two vastly different concepts. Efficiency is all about minimizing costs to deliver the existing value.

"Effectiveness is about creating new value by maximizing resources. It is the language of creative expansion: it is about imagination, creativity and ingenuity and human capacity to create new value and deliver it in unexpected ways to maximize results.

"If you are a value creator, your strategy is opposite to that of the high-street model. It's not about efficiency, it is about effectiveness. You first have to create value in order to deliver value and get results."

Martina Olbertova, Meaning.Global

Source right for success

"The conscious consumer wants things fast and wants to be able to buy clothing that is made locally. These consumers care about sustainability and want variety in design.

"The forward-thinking companies are adapting using data analytics to not only reduce unwanted inventory levels and minimizing waste in landfills, but also to create new fashion products that accurately meet changing consumer demands. They're also focusing on local-for-local sourcing and are providing trace-ability, so consumers know where their clothing has been.

"In addition, the smartest brands, and retailers should be building a supply-chain portfolio, much like a financial portfolio.

"If you have your entire supply chain sitting in one country [China] or continent [Asia], you're exposing yourself to so many risks.

"So the macroeconomics aside, I think the brands that will survive will hedge their risks and diversify their portfolio and their supply chain."

Suuchi Ramesh, Suuchi Inc.

Get educated on what the consumers want

"For years retailers have been collecting data about their customers and how they want to engage across multiple channels including mobile, online and in-store. But they're not using it to educate themselves and their organizations.

"And there is a time lag, too. They are designing six or seven months ahead of when the customer is going to want the product, but everything in the market could be changed by then. So they end up pushing all this product out, hoping something sticks.

"That's because traditional retailers still have a siloed approach. Some of the data lives in the buying organization, some in the ecommerce organization, and more is scattered elsewhere. But these teams must work more fluidly together.

"Lots of designers these days are thirsting for information about who their customer is and who they are designing for. But they don't operate in an organization that gives them access to that right now.

"Retailers need to leverage digital tools and partnerships with suppliers in a different way and in different places.

"The principle of fast fashion is all about generating tons of the latest trend as quickly as possible and pushing it out, hoping the customer will gobble it up. That's led to disposable clothing, wear it once and toss it out. It is not sustainable for the industry because it is not sustainable to the customer. They are concerned about reducing their impact on the environment.

"So customers are looking to buy something that resonates with them, that's higher quality and a better value. They don't want to sift through thousands of different throwaway styles.

"We still need the processes for fast fashion, but we should stop developing products unless it is based on specific customer data. The product to market cycle must still be fast and agile, but it must deliver against what the customers

want."

Sonia Lapinsky, AlixPartners

Use customer feedback to change, not just reinforce current practices

"Retailers are constantly sending surveys out and doing absolutely nothing to incorporate feedback or change anything.

"Capturing consumer feedback is essential in order to make tangible change and provide consumers with what they really want a memorable experience that ignites positive emotion.

"To create these personalized experiences, retailers need to effectively use the customer feedback they collect to intelligently inform strategies moving forward.

"Brands must use these insights to capitalize on the unique things customers like about their brand and quickly solve the things they don't.

"Better experiences lead to happier customers, more brand loyalty and increased revenue."

Eric Smuda, InMoment

Create community to make fashion shopping an experience



Lululemon educators. Image credit: Lululemon

"Consumers today are looking for the accumulation of experiences, not the accumulation of things.

"Fashion is an expression, and often an aspirational expression.

"If you can make your customers feel special through online and in-person opportunities, you have taken your brand from just a transaction to an interaction.

"Take a look at Lululemon. They will not only outfit you, they host yoga classes and more in store for their customers.

"It may seem insignificant but Lululemon also does not have store associates.' Lululemon has educators' in-store. There is belief from the store level to the C-level in the whole brand experience.

"Another great example is how Ulta and Sephora have created online communities for people looking to answer specific questions or learn new techniques when it comes to beauty and skincare.

"These brands have created a truly authentic and omnichannel interaction with their customers by listening to needs and understanding what was lacking: community. Their customers wanted to find ways to ask others, 'What works for you? Because maybe it will work for me too.'

"The genius of the community is that once the product is recommended by an unbiased person with the same need, the consumer is already in the right place to quickly make the purchase.

"Fashion brands can do this as well. Why are your customers coming to you? What are they dressing for? Are they wishing someone could just pull the outfit together for them?

"Ask your customers why they shop with you, and what would make it better. Revisit customer personas and focus on what motivates your customers. Create and test events online and in-store, making them exclusive with a reward for those who show up."

Holly Glowaty, Flourish

Fashion needs a complete makeover

"The whole fashion consumer sensibility has changed. But when I look at the fashion industry supply chain, from the mills to the retailers, it's not changed much because, I'm sorry to say, this is still a business run by old white men.'

"There is so much money and time invested in the current model. They seem to be praying that everything is going to come back like it was. But it's not.

"It's happening in every category.

"Look at Casper, it's not just selling mattresses, but a lifestyle. You can go into a store and take a nap in their sleep pods. Or Warby Parker, with its try five, keep one pair experience. And when you go into a Warby Parker store, you can have your eyes tested, try on glasses, put them on your social media platform and have people vote. You want to hang out there because it feels cool.

"Pick a category, any category like food, pets, beauty, wellness. The way she or he shops today is completely different from two years ago or five years ago. The expectations of the brand relationship are so dramatically different. How can anybody be sitting on the sidelines doing the same thing they've always done?

"There are so many brands that are completely disrupting and breaking the mold of what the consumer relationship model can be. Fashion's got to do it too."

Karen Young, The Young Group and Fashion Institute of Technology



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