

IN-STORE

## Rent the Runway weaves digital hallmarks into first Henri Bendel showroom

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By JOE MCCARTHY

Rent the Runway is jumping from its online-only foundation Oct. 17 with a new showroom in Henri Bendel's New York flagship store that provides consumers with a guided and efficient way to find the right outfit.

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The 1,400-square foot, second-floor showroom will feature a rotating collection of the retailer's 175 designer brands and lets consumers work directly with Rent the Runway Go-To Girl personal stylists. Beyond enhancing efficiency, the showroom gives the brand greater control over its image since in-store experiences are generally more encapsulating than digital.

"While the Henri Bendel shop is a small step into retail, it makes a lot of sense for a few key reasons," said Marko Muellner, vice president at [ShopIgniter](#), Seattle. "A short stroll through the reviews on [renttherunway.com](#) Web site shows that fit and getting the right size are the biggest challenges for online customers.

"They love the idea of wearing beautiful and expensive dresses, they love the community, customer support and ease, but even when receiving sizes, it still seems some run into

problems," he said.

"The new retail space solves both of these problems."

Mr. Muellner is not affiliated with Rent the Runway, but agreed to comment as an industry expert.

**Rent the Runway** was unable to comment by press deadline.

Out of the air

Consumers can now travel to a showroom to try on dresses prior to renting them. Also, Rent the Runway Go-To Girl personal stylists will be able to work directly with consumers, whereas only distanced interactions were possible before.



*Rent the Runway at Henri Bendel*

For all occasions, customers will be able to zip into the store to pick up dresses and accessories.

Consumers can book appointments and create style profiles at [www.renttherunway.com/henribendel](http://www.renttherunway.com/henribendel). Style profiles include information such as size, shape and style preferences.

Go-To Girls will be able to view the style profile prior to appointments to learn about the customer. The stylists will provide one-on-one consultation while customers try on dresses and search for an outfit.

Each fitting room contains a scanner and iPad so that stylists can upload dresses to a customer's "virtual closet." Notes can be added to each dress in the virtual closet and the closet can be viewed at any time.

Customers can return dresses directly to the showroom or mail them in following the rental period.



### *Cofounders of Rent the Runway*

The new showroom bolsters a physical wing for a brand that depends upon diffuse digital tactics. However, the brand's core will still remain online and the showroom will emulate the digital experience.

A senior executive from luxury rental retailer Rent the Runway at the Luxury Interactive 2013 conference said that engaging consumers after the first sale boosts ecommerce sales.

The executive explained during the "Follow-Up Sale: Personalizing Your Post-Purchase Customer Communications" panel how the retailer continuously engages consumers. Brands and retailers without bricks-and-mortar locations must use engagement and personalization tactics to make up for the lack of an in-store experience ([see story](#)).

"The new store enables them to extend personal service with the Go-To Girls," Mr. Muellner said. "Personal service is a hallmark of luxury brands and it deepens loyalty.

"Online, getting people to come back and rent again can be a challenge," he said. "You have to wait until the next event.

"Building a one-to-one relationship with a Go-To Girl is gold. They're able to make customers feel special and provide reasons and incentive for coming back."

### Place to visit

Other brands recognize the importance of establishing integrated venues for consumers to visit.

For instance, Toyota Corp.'s Lexus International created a luxury experience space Aug. 30 in Tokyo's Aoyama district for brand loyalists to interact with the automaker and each other.

The "Intersect by Lexus" space lets Lexus owners relax and interact with the brand and similar lifestyle brands in myriad ways. Fostering a space that transcends a typical showroom allows consumers to engage with the brand in new ways ([see story](#)).

"While it seems most of Rent the Runway's customers are younger consumers for whom

expensive dresses are aspirational, not necessarily the typical Henri Bendel shopper, I think it's a smart move to start within the Henri Bendel flagship store," Mr. Muellner said.

"The entire experience should feel decadent and luxurious, again, somewhat challenging when done online or through an app, so being inside Henri Bendel automatically elevates the brand building exclusivity and loyalty," he said.

"Why wouldn't you want the full experience even if you're walking out with a \$1,700 dress and a prepaid UPS envelope for \$250?"

Final take

*Joe McCarthy, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York*

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