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To find new designs, shoppers turn to online boutiques in unlikely places

By **TERI AGINS** and **CHERYL LU-LIEN TAN**

October 28, 2006; Page P3

Nikki Hall, a New York financial analyst who prides herself on her chic Manhattan style, used to spend Saturdays combing the racks of boutiques in Soho and Nolita. These days, however, she trolls stores in Leawood, Kan., and Madison, Wis.

Tired of finding popular styles and sizes sold out in New York, Ms. Hall, 35, has been turning to a growing number of online boutiques in cities around the country. In June, after failing to find a specific pair of cropped "Colette" Seven For All Mankind jeans at Saks Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdale's in New York, she typed in the words "Colette," "cropped" and "Seven jeans" on Google. That led her to Standardstyle.com, which has one store in Leawood, Kan., and is headquartered in Overland Park, Kan. The site offered free shipping and no sales tax. Ms. Hall bought a pair for \$187.

WHERE TO SHOP ONLINE

From Madison, Wis., to Portland, Ore., small boutiques are selling designer fashions online. Here's a selection of some across the country.



Letrainbleu.com

Where: Portland, Ore.

Comment: Site is mainly devoted to up-and-coming labels, such as Clu and BiLaLi of London (cropped jacket, \$505).

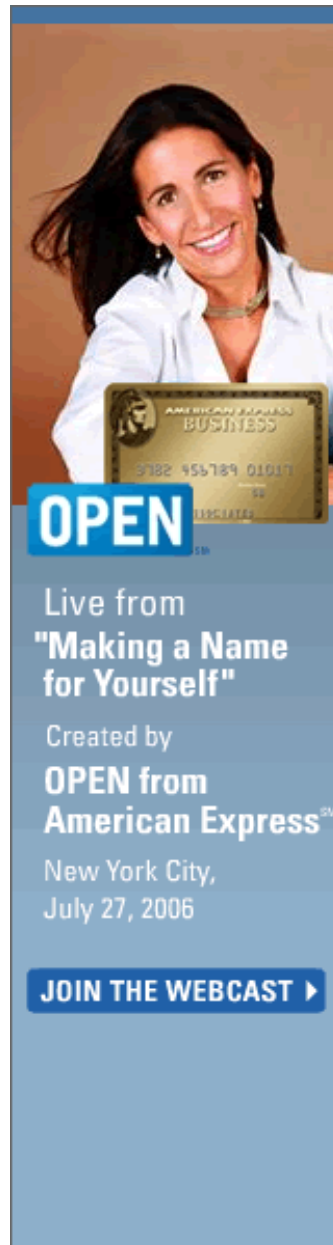


Small online boutiques located far from the traditional fashion capitals of New York and Los Angeles, are becoming major fashion players for the first time. Some carry well-known brands -- including Theory and Diane von Furstenberg -- but many are thriving because of their range of lesser-known brands sought out by consumers looking for unusual styles.

It is the latest way in which online shopping is changing the fashion map. Online sales have already expanded the reach of New York

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Where: Honolulu

Comment: Stocks designer denim (Rogan jeans, \$263) and high-end European labels like Comme des Garçons.



[Standardstyle.com](#)

Where: Leawood, Kan.

Comment: Designers range from Marc Jacobs and Nanette Lepore (cocktail dress, \$328) to up-and-comers like Siwy Denim. Free shipping on orders over \$100; no sales tax on orders shipped outside Kansas.



[Shopbop.com](#)

Where: Madison, Wis.

Comment: Long designer roster includes upscale labels like Karl Lagerfeld (wool coat, \$850) and lesser-known hip brands like Grey Ant. Shoppers can create wish lists to let friends know what they want.



[Testimoboutique.com](#)

Where: St. Louis

Comment: Wide selection of soft knit T-shirts and tunics, from designers like Norma Kamali and Tiffany Alana (wrap tunic, \$165). Free shipping on U.S. orders over \$100; no sales tax for shipping outside Missouri.

boutiques like Searle, giving people around the country access to "New York style."

Now, with offers of free shipping, no sales tax, deep-discount coupons and attentive mom-and-pop-style customer service, sites such as [Testimoboutique.com](#) in St. Louis and [Letrainbleu.com](#) in Portland, Ore., are luring high-fashion shoppers away from large, established retailers and major fashion cities.

"We have come off of 10 to 15 years of successful specialty chains and people have decided that they are tired of wearing the same thing that the person has on next to them," says Madison Riley, principal at retail consulting firm Kurt Salmon Associates. "Shoppers want to wear something that no one else has -- and that's what these online boutiques provide."

Some shoppers learn about these sites from fashion magazines, such as Lucky, which regularly showcases items in Web-boutiques. Lucky editor-in-chief Kim France says its readers brag online about "discovering something new and exciting on the Web -- finding jeans that are unknown and under the radar."

Many of today's Web boutiques offer services that big department-store chains do not. For example, [Nordstrom.com](#) and [Barneys.com](#) don't ship overseas, but [Testimoboutique.com](#) does and recently started offering free international shipping on orders over \$200. [Standardstyle.com](#) sends handwritten "thank you" notes to shoppers, while [Boutiquemanhattan.com](#), based in Kirkland, Wash., will special order certain goods that are out of stock at no extra cost. [Shopbop.com](#), in Madison, Wis., has personal shoppers available to offer advice on putting ensembles together, even trying on pieces for customers and describing how they fit.

Often, the key selling point is merchandise customers haven't seen elsewhere. [Letrainbleu.com](#) stocks merchandise from KD Dance, a high-end knitwear brand popular with professional dancers. Nina Stotler, 26, a New York-based trend analyst, recently bought a discontinued style of APC designer jeans that she had never seen before from Hawaii-based [Aloharag.com](#).

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These online boutiques do have some limitations. Most don't have a network of stores where shoppers can exchange clothes. Night owls with questions about merchandise typically have to wait to shop until business hours, when most online boutiques operate. The mix of obscure independent fashion labels at some of these sites can vary in quality and fit.

Still, online clothes shopping is booming. Online sales of apparel accessories and footwear are expected to grow 22% this year to \$13.8 billion from 2005, representing 6% of all apparel, accessories and footwear

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sales -- up from \$4.4 billion in 2001, according to Shop.org, the association for online retailers and a division of the National Retail Federation.

Among the best known of the online boutiques is Shopbop.com, which has more than one million unique visitors monthly. Shopbop, acquired by Amazon earlier this year, recently became the exclusive online retailer for the Helmut Lang designer brand, which relaunches in January.

Designers like small online shops because they appeal to a broad audience of fashion-savvy shoppers as department stores are consolidating. Designer Rebecca Taylor says sites such as Shopbop.com do a healthy business in some of her edgier styles, partly because they display pictures that show how the looks can be accessorized and worn.

"We recently had a tunic-style dress where the customer might think, 'Do you wear it alone or over a skinny jean?'" says Beth Bugdaycay, chief executive of Rebecca Taylor. "Online, they'll show it both ways and the customer gets it right away. The sell through on these fashion-forward items online is high."

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