



Monday, November 17, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

"Returnistas": all the rage for the fall/winter season

By Beth Teitell
The Boston Globe

BOSTON — Gabrielle Mancuso, a nursing student and certified nursing assistant, adores shopping. American Eagle, TJ Maxx, H&M, those are her haunts. But with bad economic news bombarding her daily, there's something that brings the stylish Mancuso more pleasure than buying jeans and tops: returning those jeans and tops — unworn.

"I get cash back," Mancuso, 19, of Franklin, Mass., explained as she browsed at the Prudential Center in Boston recently. "It's instant gratification."

With many fashionistas reinventing themselves as "recessionistas" — style lovers who buy lower-priced versions of their beloved designer goods — Mancuso is taking fiscal restraint one step further. She's a "returnista," and she's engaging in one of the biggest trends for fall/winter '08. Call it circle shopping. It goes like this: Fashionistas make a purchase, stress out about it, return the item unused, exult. And, of course, repeat.

"There's a weird euphoria when you return something," said Michelle Foss, 33, as she shopped. "You're relieved that it's coming off your credit card."

Unlike "wardrobers" — crooked shoppers who buy with the intention of using their purchases before returning them — returnistas are guilty of nothing more than a bad case of buyer's remorse. Some have lost jobs and know they shouldn't be shopping at all, others haven't seen a decrease in income but worry they should be saving for an uncertain future. Some feel guilty about spending when others can't.

With U.S. consumer confidence plunging to a record low in October, returns are hitting an all-time high, according to the Conference Board, a private research group. A new survey by the National Retail Federation predicts retailers will see \$219 billion in returns this year — a dramatic increase over last year, when returns totaled \$178 billion, and over 2006, when they were \$169 billion. "That is a significant increase," said Joseph LaRocca, vice president of loss prevention with the National Retail Federation.

The majority of returns are legitimate — in 2008, only a fraction, \$11.81 billion, will be fraudulent, that is, items that were stolen, bought with a fraudulent check, or used. But even so, they're "not something retailers look forward to," LaRocca said. In fact, 17 percent of retailers are tightening return policies this year, either by reducing the time allowed for returns, restricting the number of returns a shopper can make, or charging restocking fees. At the same time, however, the weakening economy has prompted 11 percent of retailers to loosen return policies in an attempt to woo shoppers.

Either way, shoppers are bringing things back — or trying to. Karen Fabbri, owner of Moxie, a Beacon Hill, Boston, shoe and handbag boutique, has started seeing customers who appear to be "going through their

closets to see what they can bring back." The store gives merchandise credit for unworn shoes brought back within 10 days, and considers accessories sales final.

"I feel [some customers] are really hurting," Fabbri said. "They bring back stuff they've had for six months."

Or, in the case of a shopper at Stil, a boutique in the Mall at Chestnut Hill, 36 minutes. A woman bought a \$228 woven Paul Smith belt at the stylish store, walked out the door, apparently started worrying about her purchase, and marched back in, desperate for the manager to make an exception to the exchange-only return policy and refund her money.

"[The woman] said she felt guilty and she really couldn't do this right now," Betty Riaz, the owner, recalled. "And she'd even gotten 20 percent off."

Although many returnistas would prefer to keep their purchases if they could do so guilt-free, circle shopping is not without psychological benefits, said Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. Shopping is about more than having new things, she said.

"The hunt itself is crazy fun for a lot of people. The act of buying it — not even having it — gives people a sense of control. There's this sense of, 'I'm in charge of my feelings and my future,' and a sense of indulgence." Beyond that, she adds, with drastic markdowns offered by anxious retailers, forgoing a purchase can lead to its own kind of stress.

"There's a fear of missing out that propels a lot of purchasing," Yarrow said.

And then, when the fear of the credit- or debit-card statement strikes, there's returning to look forward to. "Taking something back that you don't want feels a lot better than not being able to buy something that you think you do want," Yarrow added.

And — who knew? — circle shopping may be smarter financially than not buying in the first place, says University of Pennsylvania economist Joel Waldfogel. "I had not thought about the question until you posed it," he wrote in an e-mail. "But it evokes the following image in my mind. Suppose I spent \$500 on a Crock-Pot a few weeks ago and did not open it and kept the receipt. In the meantime, my stock portfolio declined, say, a quarter in value. The unopened Crock-Pot turns out to be the best asset in my portfolio, better than stocks, and almost as good as old-fashioned passbook savings."

Sounds good, if you don't count the gas it took to get to the store, or the return shipping charges, or the items you bought while you were at the store returning the Crock-Pot, that is.

Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company