

# THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

A trio of Atlanta-area businesswomen are putting new twists on traditional brick-and-mortar shopping practices.

By Rebecca Kleinman

**A**tough economy and saturated retail market calls for creative new measures to attract shoppers. No longer is a simple sale or exclusive trunk show enough to open up today's tight wallets.

New stores, such as Atlanta's Fab'rik, which caters to the contemporary and cheap chic markets, have staged

elaborate theme parties and sell crossover services such as yoga classes to clients. Marketing companies and event producers are also teaming up with established retailers for in-store events or soirees at alternative venues.

Sample sale mavens can do business much cheaper here than in New York and with less competition, although they still have to stay on top of New York trends and maintain contacts. Here are three Atlanta-based companies pioneering this trend in the Southeast.

## CHLOE JO EVENTS

Some might say Atlanta's Chloe Jo Events serves up the modern version of the Tupperware party. But instead of plastic containers, 26-year-old owner Chloe Jo Berman peddles cutting-edge fashion in fun settings. She plans to alternate 12 monthly sample sales between Atlanta and New York each year, with a sales goal total of \$15,000 per event.

The native New Yorker got her start throwing sample sales in Manhattan's garment district, packing them in for the likes of Lucy Barnes, Lacoste, Easel and Theory, through direct e-mail campaigns.

"I was a hipster about town and a nice Jewish girl who liked to talk a lot. I knew I'd use all those business cards from endless conversations for something someday," she said.

Berman hopes Atlantans will embrace bargains and alternative shopping resources, as her New York clients did. In December 2002 she debuted her skills at The Velvet Room, a Peachtree Street nightclub. Dubbed "NYC Shop-a-Go-Go," the evening rounded up emerging designers from New York and Atlanta with plenty of DJ beats and cocktails.

Vendors aren't as edgy as those she works with in New York, yet Berman said they're often funkier than resources at

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"Shopping diva" Peg Samuel and customer Lexi Tabback at the Andrew boutique party.

local boutiques. December's New York-based participants included Kader Kang, known for sexy, streamlined pin-stripe suits to E.vil, an undergarment and T-shirt line with bold statements.

Atlanta's fashion community was represented by Amy Tan, designer of Amy Tangerine, and Christa Burton, a jewelry designer. "My goal is to find undiscovered, local designers who can't afford to mass produce for Barneys, but who can bring 40 pieces to sell," said Berman.

Other than some Christa Burton pieces, every item was priced at \$250 or less. Cost was significantly below retail, and Berman split profits down the middle with wholesalers.

"It's important to me to keep [prices] around \$100 or less. I want to appeal to girls like me who can't afford couture," she said.

#### LUXE

Like many New Yorkers, Jen Ripley needed a break from it all. The entrepreneur relocated to Atlanta in December 2002 and wasted no time reestablishing her sample sale business, Luxe.

"Atlanta doesn't have a lot of what I do, whereas there's a sample sale on every corner in New York," said Ripley.

For her April debut, she rented a 1,500-square-foot loft space in the King Plow Arts Center. The sale was preceded



Jen Ripley tours the country snapping up overstock for her Atlanta and New York-based sample sales.

PHOTOS BY DAEMON BAZAN

by a catered affair on Thursday, April 3, with champagne, a live band and well-appointed goodie bags. The main event officially began that Saturday at 11 a.m., though shoppers showed up early for discounted Prada, Catherine Malandrino and Jimmy Choo.

Some stockpiled clothes over their arms without trying them on, while others took time to find the perfect fitting pair of Blue Cult jeans. Denim, normally retailing between \$120 and \$145 a pair, sold out at only \$45 a pop. Other deals included Prada mink-trimmed suits discounted from \$2,800 to \$699 and Helmut Lang pants for \$125, originally \$500.

To offer such low prices, Ripley frequently travels abroad to tour factories and buys overstocked clothing, accessories

or cancelled orders. Throwing a sample show can cost between \$700 and \$2,000, including advertising, drinks and gift bags, but local businesses often donate gift items. While she won't give an exact sales figure, she said she makes in one weekend what a good boutique would sell in a month.

The next event will be held in June, featuring brands such as Voyage, Gucci, and Chloé. She also plans a Spring 2008 sale at 75 percent off in August and an eveningwear sale in September just in time for the charity ball season.

"My goal is to do six to eight sales per year, with trunk shows in between," said Ripley.

#### SOCIAL DIVA

Spotted at trendy lounges and hip functions all over town, Peg Samuel embodies the name of her event marketing and public relations company: Social Diva. She got the nickname during her stint as social chairperson for the Atlanta Interactive Marketing Association.

Samuel's main job is doing p.r. work for clients ranging from the transportation industry to the spa sector. In 2000, she launched a side business, Diva's Day Out, which pampers clients with lavish, custom packages including limousine chauffeuring, spas, shopping, dining and nightlife. Packages start at \$60 per person and are arranged according to area of town, time of day or Samuel's knack for finding cool places.

"I try to pick unusual shops or restaurants clients wouldn't find on their own, rather than something at the mall. It's great for them because they get to do something new, and great for specialty retailers to get that exposure," she said.

Samuel applies her vast database of shopaholics to organizing in-store gatherings. In November, she teamed up with Andrew: Men Women Home, a lifestyle store in Atlanta's Midtown neighborhood, for a three-hour shopping party featuring onsite massages and facials. No discount was given, though the next event calls for a sale to stir up more excitement.

The boutique and a nearby restaurant in Duluth also participated in a Diva event that included a fashion show, wine tasting and charity donation. And Atlanta boutiques Fab'rik, Blue Genes and K-La have benefited from her mailing list or custom packages with increased exposure and sales.

"We used Peg's services for our black-and-white fashion party in May, and we got tons of response from it. People respect her for being the social diva and take notice of events she promotes. Plus she targets a client base that wants to shop in a different way," said Fab'rik owner Dana Williams.

Samuel said successful marketing lies in mixing related services like massages and shopping.

"The way this economy is going, you need to give people a reason to pick your business, whether it's a store or restaurant."



Samuel and customer Tabback at a fashion show by designer Lisa Galpi, left.