

## STYLE

### ON STYLE

# A Deal-Hunter's Guide to the Galaxy

Amid Vast Numbers of Sales, There's an Art to Finding the Deepest Discounts and Best Time to Buy

The deepest and broadest counting in living memory is creating a quandary for consumers: There are so many sales that people don't know where to start—or when to hold off.

Brands from Lands' End to the haute Bottega Veneta are cutting prices on rarely discounted staples, and fashions are on sale for as much as 80% off. The next few weeks



By Christina Binkley

present especially rich shopping opportunities, as stores are trying to make space for spring shipments that will begin arriving in mid-January, and designers want to clear their warehouses of fall looks that retailers didn't want. Yes, the fashion calendar is crazy—and you can take advantage of it.

The discounts are deeper and earlier than usual because nervous lenders have been quick to call defaults on designers' business loans, says Bill Wagner, a banking and financial work-out attorney with Baker & McKenzie in New York. In order to raise cash, clothing manufacturers aren't waiting until next season to sell extra current-season goods to off-price stores; they're doing it now. For the fashion industry, "this is a grab to get cash any way you can," Mr. Wagner says.

"It's almost like high-end retailers are competing with the Loehmann's / Filene's outlets these days," says Elita Ng, who launched a discount-tracking



John Coburn

Web site, DealDivine.com, in October to assemble coupons, sales and discounts on everything from fashion to technology.

If you're a bargain-hunter, there are plenty of places to begin. But it pays to be picky. Haute brand Bottega Veneta knocked 30% off the price of its *intrecciato* woven bags, selling them for roughly \$1,000—a real deal if you're a Bottega fan. Still, with sample sales and discounters selling current-season looks for up to 80% off, I'm turning up my nose these days at most fashion discounts of less than 50%.

Timing is everything. Consider the black wool Balenciaga coat that was selling recently for 45% off at Neiman Marcus. Is that a good deal? To some extent, this depends on whether you can live without the coat. It could sell out at that price.

Yet the price could go somewhat lower. It's not until department stores sell fashion and accessories at 70% off, in general, that they're sell-

ing them at around the wholesale price they paid. After hitting that level, department stores often ship unsold goods to off-price stores such as Ross Dress for Less and Century 21, which sell marked-down goods.

The fact that more manufacturers this fall are selling directly to off-price stores to raise fast cash means that it can be especially worthwhile to look at such stores these days. Shoppers report seeing the likes of Prada, Missoni and Helmut Lang in the ultra-low-priced "Runway" sections of T.J. Maxx stores. "With department stores canceling orders, we're getting additional brands," says Laura McDowell, a T.J. Maxx spokeswoman. "They have excess product. They know we pay our bills on time and we can't return the product."

Off-price stores near wealthy business or residential enclaves are likely to get the best stuff. Richard Jaffee, a retail analyst with Stifel Nicolaus in New York, recently saw Cartier, Tag Heuer and Breitling watches at the Filene's Basement near Union Square in New York. Century 21 has a well-stocked store near Wall Street in New York. Loehmann's "Back Room" in Miami is particularly full, Mr. Jaffee says.

Off-price stores and outlets often stock up on Thursdays and Fridays for the weekend hordes—so shop on Friday evening, says Mr. Jaffee. He recommends heading to department-store outlets such as Nordstrom Rack, Saks Off Fifth and Neiman's Last Call.

"They're getting better stuff" than in past years because the parent retailers are doing poorly, he says.

Tourist zones get more traffic and therefore more goods. For years, I've found extraordinary bargains at the Saks Off Fifth outlet in Las Vegas. Bob

Brvenik, president of outlet-mall developer Prime Retail, says his company's malls are chock-a-block with luxury goods. The Baccarat outlet at Prime's Orlando mall recently received a \$40,000 crystal chandelier, priced at 40% off. He recently bought himself a Zegna overcoat for \$250, marked down from \$995, at Prime Retail's San Marcos, Texas, outlet mall near San Antonio.

Sample sales—direct from designers—are a cornucopia of price-slashing deals. Daily Candy ([www.daily-candy.com](http://www.daily-candy.com)) often reports on local sample sales. In New York City, check out Soiffer Haskin and Clothing Line—both in the Garment District. Register with the Web sites of your favorite stores and brands. They'll let you know about "pre-sales," when you can get the deals before the masses.

Among resale shops, which take in gently worn cast-offs, the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center Thrift Shop in New York is sometimes called the Bergdorf Goodman of thrift shops. Its "designer room" recently teemed with luxury goods, including a black and white Carolina Herrera evening gown for \$350; a gray tone-on-tone Armani jacket for \$150; and, for \$1,200, a full-length Givenchy mink coat. "We've had an exceptional year this year," says store manager Anita Askienazy.

Email [Christina.Binkley@wsj.com](mailto:Christina.Binkley@wsj.com)

### Getting There First

Here are some of the many online resources for fashion deals and early notice of sales:

#### Insider Alerts:

- **Loehmann's Insider Club** – Sends exclusive offers and notifications of deals and new arrivals. [www.loehmanns.com](http://www.loehmanns.com)
- **Filene's Basement Fan Club** – Offers special savings and notifications of new designer arrivals. [www.filenesbasement.com](http://www.filenesbasement.com)
- **Neiman Marcus Last Call** – Sends out sale news and special offers. [www.nmlastcallclearancecenter.com](http://www.nmlastcallclearancecenter.com)
- **Century 21** – Sends out email or text alerts of hot arrivals. [www.c21stores.com](http://www.c21stores.com)

#### Online Guides and Outlets:

- **ShopItToMe.com** – Emails you about sales involving favorite brands or stores.
- **6pm.com** – Offers shoes, apparel, and accessories at deep discounts, but not always luxury.
- **DealDivine.com** – Compiles coupons, sales and other deals.
- **TopButton.com** – Offers a cornucopia of online sample sales.
- **Gilt.com and RueLaLa.com** – These members-only sites (joining is easy) hold limited-time-only sales of luxury brands.

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