

Bra Fittings Are Good for Sales

Source: St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Date: 5/16/2007

ST. LOUIS _ A few weeks ago, Margaret Byrd saw a Macy's advertisement promoting a bra-fitting event at a St. Louis store. She called her granddaughter, who never had been fitted, to suggest they take the plunge together.

"A lot of people are wearing the wrong size," said Byrd, 78. "As you get older, you're probably wearing the wrong bra. I thought it was time to check it out."

Obviously, a lot of other women felt the same way as they jammed Macy's intimate-apparel department at lunchtime. A team of fitters, measuring tapes around their necks, darted into dressing rooms clutching plastic mini-hangers draped with dangling bras.

"When my grandmother said, 'Let's get fitted,' I thought it would be a good idea," said Robin Lloyd, 41. "I found out I was wearing the wrong size. I'm glad I came. It was definitely an education, and I'll be letting my friends know they should at least try it."

When a retailer holds a bra-fitting event, it typically partners with one or more manufacturers to provide a group of fitters at different store locations over several days. The fitters measure customers in dressing rooms and bring them styles that work with their body types.

While retailers won't make public specific figures, they do say these fitting events push intimate-apparel sales up dramatically, with women buying bras at higher price points, selecting a variety of styles and adding matching panties, camisoles and other items from the department.

Fran Musante, a fitting specialist with Maidenform Brands Inc. in New York, said her team fitted 253 women and sold 500 bras at a recent three-day event in the New York-Connecticut area. And those were just the sales of Maidenform and Lilyette brands.

"We have them lined up at these fitting events. You put someone in a department with a tape measure and the women flock in," Musante said. "At the corporate level, they must say, 'Look at the influx of business.'"

Although intimate-apparel departments now are primarily self-service, this has not always been the case. Some years ago, sales clerks fitted customers, showed them styles that were kept in a drawer and retrieved the right sizes from a storage room.

Things started to change in the early 1960s with a huge influx of styles, fabrics and colors. Vendors and retailers felt women would be more likely to buy if garments were displayed on fixtures. Also, it no longer proved practical to keep so much merchandise in drawers.

While intimate apparel specialty stores have continued to offer fitters, the service has dwindled at many department stores over the years. Although today most department stores offer some level of fitting service, many women think they have to wait for a fitting event to be measured, Musante said.

However, the growing response to these fitting events has made retailers see the need to expand the service.

Even Kohl's, the value-oriented department store, started having bra-fitting events last year. As recently as this month, it partnered with Olga to fit women at stores across the country.

THE OPRAH FACTOR

Then there is the Oprah factor.

"I saw this on 'Oprah.' I've heard almost every woman here say it," said Margaret Latham, a Vanity Fair selling specialist who was helping to fit women at the recent event.

Oprah Winfrey gave bra fitting an immeasurable lift in 2005 when it was a topic on two of her eponymous shows, both of which were rebroadcast last year. Since then, interest in the subject has been strong.

"Every woman watching, this is going to change your life," Oprah said on her program on May 20, 2005. "I'm revealing a beauty secret that literally performs miracles. ... Listen to this ... 85 percent of all women are wearing the wrong one."

And if women didn't get the point in that show, they surely got it on Nov. 15, 2005, when about 40 fitters from Seattle-based Nordstrom Inc. were flown to Chicago for an Oprah taping at which they measured almost 250 audience members, 94 percent of whom Oprah said were wearing the wrong size bra.

SALES RISE; BUZZ CONTINUES

A few days after the show aired, a spokeswoman for Nordstrom said bra sales at the retailer had risen 189 percent compared with the year-ago period.

"The buzz is still out there," said Sandra Saffle, Nordstrom's corporate fit and prosthesis manager. "It's a wonderful time to be in this business. Ladies who were fitted a year ago are coming back in to repeat that experience."

"We refer to it as the 'Oprah intervention' because business skyrocketed after that," said Sue Smith, Midwest regional consultant manager for Wacoal America, DKNY and Donna Karan Intimates.

And the experience has had a domino effect as women who are fitted tell their friends and relatives. In fact, said Saffle, there are plenty of women of different generations _ such as Byrd and Lloyd _ coming in for fittings at the same time.

"It's the experience of doing it together," Saffle said.

Intimate apparel experts say women should get fitted once a year, or at least every other year. Weight and lifestyle changes, along with aging, are among reasons why a woman's size can fluctuate.

A poorly fitting bra can affect a woman's appearance and make her uncomfortable. It also can lead to back and shoulder pain.

EVENTS IN THE FALL, SPRING

Many fitting events are held in October, coinciding with National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and again in the spring at the end of April and early May.

Wacoal, for example, has been sponsoring a program called "Fit For the Cure," in which it donates \$2 to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for every woman that gets fitted in a Wacoal, DKNY Underwear or Donna Karan Intimates bra. The company donates another \$2 for every bra purchased during the events.

For this year, Wacoal will make a minimum donation of \$250,000.

Wacoal estimates it has fitted more than 250,000 women since the program began six years ago. "Breast health in general is part of the whole concept of fitting," said Diane Andrews, bra and foundation buyer for Macy's Midwest.

Andrews said the demand for fitters is so great that about a year ago Macy's started a certification program in which anyone who works in the intimate-apparel area must learn how to fit customers. Now there are about 60 to 70 certified fitters in the chain's Midwest division, with 26 certified in the St. Louis area.

"Before that, there was just a handful," she said.

Leilani Matthews, body fashions specialist at Dillard's, said the chain has had a fitting program for about 20 years and requires that all intimate-apparel saleswomen learn how to fit bras.

"The increase in sales comes from women who learn to have confidence to buy a product," Matthews said, adding that fitters also teach customers about wardrobing, that different kinds of clothing call for different kinds of bras.

"It's an `aha moment' when they get a fitting," said Andrews. "After you fit them, you have them put their T-shirt on over the new bra. Then they see where the girls were and where they are now."

BEST SELLERS

Top five bra brands based on February and March sales:

1. Victoria's Secret
2. Playtex
3. Bali
4. Hanes
5. Maidenform

Source: The NPD Group Inc.

WHERE WOMEN BUY THEIR BRAS

Sales for February and March:

Dollar volume (in thousands)

Specialty stores \$2,115,581

Mass merchants \$1,412,025

National chains \$913,625

Department stores \$810,379

Direct mail, e-retail \$217,302

Off-price retailers \$211,051

Factory outlets \$131,118

Other \$82,047

Total \$5,893,128

Source: The NPD Group Inc.

(c) 2007, St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Visit the Post-Dispatch on the World Wide Web at <http://www.stltoday.com/>

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Copyright 2007 St. Louis Post-Dispatch