



Lord & Taylor's Faster
Fashion Approach

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Can the historic department store compete with the likes of Zara?

BY TIFFANY YANNETTA | NOV 2, 2016, 12:02PM

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Lord & Taylor is the oldest department store in the country. It was founded in 1826 and predates Macy's and Bloomingdale's by more than 30 and 50 years, respectively. Bergdorf Goodman didn't come around until about 70 years later, and by the time Barneys New York opened in 1923, Lord & Taylor had been in business for close to a century. In ten years, it will celebrate its 200th anniversary.

That's a lot of history, but history by itself isn't going to keep any store afloat in 2016. Staying relevant and exciting takes work. It's why Barneys and Saks recently opened sleek, tightly-edited downtown flagships in New York, and why Bergdorf just underwent a major renovation to its storied main hall.

Lord & Taylor, on the other hand, is going in a different direction. This fall, it launched a "faster fashion" initiative with weekly drops of three exclusive lines: [IMNYC](#) [Isaac Mizrahi](#), [H Halston](#), and [Highline Collective](#). This, of course, is not its only strategy, but it's definitely one that's both notable and unprecedented.

To put that into perspective, these lines will be putting out merchandise almost as fast as Zara gets new stuff. MaryAnne Morin, the executive vice president and chief merchant of Hudson's Bay Company and Lord & Taylor, describes this as "a continuation of our strategy to offer exclusive brands and great product, and also have the ability to react quickly, in season, to reorders and emerging trends."

More frequent deliveries will allow the department store to sell new merchandise to its customers on a weekly basis, and it'll also allow the brands themselves to respond in real time to customer demand. It's sort of like the [buzzy direct-to-consumer model](#), but with a single retailer in the middle.

In theory, that sounds like a win for everyone: Shoppers get more of a selection, and brands get valuable feedback and can course-correct accordingly. On top of all that, Lord & Taylor can boast that it will always have brand new merchandise for the customer who likes to shop there a few times a month. By leaning into this strategy, Lord & Taylor isn't really competing with other department stores — it's competing with H&M.



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"We're living in a digital world where trends appear, peak, and die faster than the past," says Morin. "It's imperative that department stores adapt to offer customers what they want when they want it."

And though the partnership wasn't created as a reaction to fashion's current obsession with season-less collections and the [see-now, buy-now model](#), it sure as hell fits in with the theory that people want what they want when they want it.

“I think that there's certainly a trend within the industry that facilitates the need for a much greater pace of change. It's not just about trying to persuade people to buy. I think it's also about trying to keep people interested,” says retail analyst Neil Saunders. “We know, for example, if you're going to visit a physical store, that you want to have a reason to visit. If every time you go it looks exactly the same or there's very little change in terms of what's in stock there, it really dissuades people from visiting.”

Lord & Taylor is certainly not the only department store experimenting with quick turnaround and markdowns — Saks, Nordstrom, and Neiman Marcus all have outlet offshoots that essentially provide the same experience: a large selection of merchandise that's actually in season and at good prices. But those stores are careful to keep the two businesses separate. Lord & Taylor is putting it all under one roof, and that has potential to get a bit murky.

Steve Barr, a retail and consumer leader at PwC, cautions against this kind of flip-flopping. “The department stores have to ask the question: What do you want your brand to be in the future?” he says. “If you begin to dilute your brand with quick turnover, low price points, and perceived lower quality, does that have some sort of a diluted effect to the more premium aspects of the overall retail banner brand and of the individual brands that are within the store?”

The faster-fashion strategy only applies to a very small selection of Lord & Taylor's product offerings and space on the selling floor. Most customers probably won't even notice that there just so happens to be full racks of these three specific lines every time they visit. But would it be better if they did, or would that just be confusing? Would they come to expect it from all the brands, across the board?

“Retailers need to have a very clear identity and stick to their purpose, and when retailers try to be all things to all people, they get caught in the middle” explains Barr. “Being in the middle is a very dangerous place to be.”





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In the Fifth Avenue flagship, **H Halston** — the most hyped of the three labels — takes up a moderately-sized space on the fourth floor. Cameron Silver, the founder of the very successful **vintage store Decades**, is its fashion director. The line is an offshoot of **Halston Heritage**, and Halston Heritage is the reincarnation of Halston, the womenswear brand that had its heyday in the 1970s under designer Roy Halston Frowick. H Halston is only available at Lord & Taylor — you won't even see a mention of it on the Halston Heritage

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“There's tremendous value, because you're not buying something that's gone through a zillion markups,” Silver says to me on the night of H Halston's launch party. Which is true — with Lord & Taylor as the brand's only retailer, there's no additional middleman. The price point is equal to Zara, but since Lord & Taylor is a promo-heavy store, you can often find it for much cheaper. Right now, **the entire brand** is on sale on the department store's website.

The night of the H Halston launch at Lord & Taylor, there was a DJ, passed desserts, and a step-and-repeat. The clothes — packed in on metal racks — didn't exactly seem like they were invited to the party.

What was noticeably missing the night of the launch — and what feels as though is missing from the department store in general — is any clue that this is a brand you want to shop. That you *need* to shop. That if you buy this, you'll look cool, or sophisticated, or “effortless,” or like Gigi Hadid. There are so many lines to shop at Lord & Taylor, but without any distinct branding beyond a logo on top of a display, it all begins to blend together.

Good marketing is something that fast fashion brands have figured out a long, long time ago. You can very easily disguise low- to medium-quality clothing with stunning campaign imagery and buzzy models so long as there's a really specific POV. And it needs to be in your face — when you're walking by, or flipping through a magazine, or contemplating a purchase at the register. It comes to you. What Zara lacks in luxury, it makes up for with high-quality, fashion-forward campaigns that are so spatially big (both online and in real life) that you couldn't miss them if you tried.

If Lord & Taylor isn't trying to go luxury, that's fine. There are plenty of expensive brands and stores out there right now, and we could probably use a few less. Morin is right in that there's an insatiable demand from shoppers for more, and faster, and that's not going away anytime soon. There is indeed plenty of space on that field.

But if Lord & Taylor wants to play that game, it needs to rethink how it's selling trends. It's not enough to react to what shoppers want by giving them new stuff. Because shoppers want “new” as much as they want “more.” To really build a strong brand identity, retailers need to show them new trends for the first time in a way that actually feels cool. It's not just about responding to trends — it's about pushing them forward, even if you're not the one creating them.