



Style

Looking Gorgeous: What Women Won't Give Up

Heidi Brown and Jenna Goudreau, 02.05.09, 04:24 PM EST

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The economy has paled, but women still want their complexions to glow. And they're willing to pay for it.

There's a drumbeat of bad news on the retail front. **Circuit City** is closing its doors for good. Detroit can't pay its customers to buy its cars. Even **Wal-Mart** is saying its value-loving customers are keeping their wallets closed.

Most shoppers have cut way back. Those who, before the downturn, bought so-called "aspirational" brands--**Gucci** purses, say--are paring down and making items last longer. But even in tough times, there are some things a girl just won't give up.

We all want to keep ourselves looking good--for professional and personal reasons. Plus, it's just fun to indulge, even if it's in something little like a luscious

Chanel lipstick.

In Pictures: What Women Are Still Buying

"During the Depression, we saw the 'Lipstick Effect,'" says Northwestern University professor of marketing Nancy Upton of the increase in cosmetic sales, particularly lipstick, despite buyers' financial hardship. "We see people making economically irrational decisions to lift their mood."

Because the price point is lower for many women, "cosmetics offer immediate gratification," explains Upton.

Jaime Cassavechia, vice president of Susan Blond, Inc., an entertainment public relations firm, feels that looking good is essential to her job and keeps her spirits high. Though she's cut back her beauty regime--giving up pedicures, making fewer trips to the hair salon and "reinventing" old Chanel suits--she still makes the occasional splurge.

"I must confess, I did splurge on a MAC lipstick and gloss at [Henri Bendel](#)," Cassavechia says, "but in my business you have to feel confident and look fabulous."

As for bigger-ticket items, women are opting for traditional rather than trendy. "Women are not as focused on the 'it' bag now," explains Milton Pedraza, who heads the Luxury Institute, which conducts research on the high-end market. "They're buying the classics--Akris suits, Birkin bags, Chanel."

In other words, they're looking for enduring styles and quality materials, bucking trends and mediocre craftsmanship.

"In this new economy, it's critical to choose investment pieces wisely," says Niki Leondakis, COO of Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants. She prefers high-quality bags that "don't scream a year or season," like Bottega Veneta, Nancy Gonzalez and **Coach** (nyse: [COH - news - people](#)). She chooses classically cut jackets and timeless fabrics like cashmere as staples of her wardrobe and pulls together outfits with less expensive accessories.

"I'm still buying luxury brands," admits Leondakis, "but definitely fewer items and with a newfound discipline to hold out for a sale."

Leondakis is not alone. Across the country, women from every income bracket are spending less, forcing companies to adapt. The windows of Fifth Avenue stores in Manhattan now display 75% discount signs and many beauty lines are offering more for the dollar.

Frédéric Fekkai unveiled a \$30 at-home hair coloring kit (now on sale) a considerable savings from an in-salon color treatment that can run about \$400, and skin-care line Terralina provides complimentary home delivery and sales to encourage customers to buy consistently.

Brands like Eva Scrivo and Chantecaille don't want to lose their luxury status by slashing prices, so instead are offering customer rewards: on-the-house spa days, facials and private color consultations with renowned hair and makeup artists.

While professional women are booking fewer vacations and buying less for their homes, they're not likely to scale down to inferior beauty brands. "These women say price is not a factor," says Karen Grant, a vice president at NPD Research and a global beauty expert. "They may buy less and shop less frequently, but they're not as apt to switch to a lower-priced brand."

Since looking good on the job is often critical for women, beauty and style items tend to trump other luxuries. Kate Wilkinson, account executive at MS&L Worldwide, now skips **Starbucks** (nasdaq: [SBUX - news - people](#)) but can't give up her bi-weekly mani/pedis.

And Ashley Castro, an account executive at Quinn & Co., gave up her treasured massages but continues to get manicures and professional hair color.

When it comes to cosmetic surgery, women are still opting in--partly to remain competitive in the workplace--though less frequently than a year ago.

Steven J. Pearlman, M.D., FACS, a Columbia professor and former president of the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, still sees a steady stream of women at his private practice, but observes that many are changing their habits.

Money restraints caused a spike in nonsurgical wrinkle reducers like Botox and fillers, which produce quick results at a fraction of the price of a facelift. But even among those women regularly receiving injections, Pearlman says they are coming back only when they absolutely need to, increasingly a month or more later than is recommended.

Tight budgets are also forcing tough choices. Says Pearlman: "What they're doing now is picking and choosing one region of Botox instead of two. They have to decide between their crows' feet or the wrinkle between the brow line."