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Bargain shoppers can get a rush from speed shopping offered by online sample sales

Online sample sales offer deep discounts for the fashion-savvy shopper, if you can beat the rush

By JENNY B. DAVIS

<http://www.star-telegram.com/living/story/1311207.html>

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When Jennifer Miller-Phillips sees a certain text message pop up on her cellphone screen, she knows she needs to act fast. That text message, from a Web site called Ideeli, tells her that an online sample sale is about to begin, and the clock will start ticking on her chance to score designer gear marked down as much as 80 percent from the retail price.

At the appointed hour, this busy Fort Worth mom will compete with a select group of fashion-savvy shoppers across the country undoubtedly scouring the site at the same time for the same smokin' deals. Thanks to Ideeli, Miller-Phillips says she has scored a butter-soft leather Gustto bag and a cream leather hobo bag from the exclusive Parisian label Lancel, all at prices far lower than what was printed on the tags.

Welcome to the exclusive world of invitation-only online sample sales. Accessible only by the code-holding few, these Web sites stage single-designer sales styled as "boutiques" nearly every day. Some boutiques are open a few days, some only hours. Notification goes out to members up to a week in advance, and only those members can gain access to the luxury merchandise ranging from Valentino frocks to Balenciaga bags to Helmut Lang menswear and Lucy Sykes New York childrenswear. Also in the mix are sunglasses, serving platters, suitcases, lip gloss sets, candles and sheet sets, all discounted up to 90 percent.

How the sites work

The easiest way to become a member is to be invited by another member, but some sites offer the chance to join a membership waiting list. The upside of the exclusivity: A smaller number of shoppers competing for the deals. The downside: The group can be very, very motivated.

"You have to jump on it," says Abby Stark, a junior at Texas Christian University. "If a good boutique is coming up, there are three of us who will run to the computer lab so that we don't miss anything, and then we'll run back to class."

But both women say shopping these sites is well worth the rush. Stark appreciates the discount. "Everything is remarkably marked down — at least 50 percent — and I feel like I am getting a great deal," she says.

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For Miller-Phillips, it's about selection — many of the upscale handbags she covets just aren't widely available in Tarrant County. The ideeli site "gets the designers who are not always known and some who are up-and-coming, but they also get the Fendis and the Guccis," she says. Not to mention the convenience of shopping at home. "With a 2 1/2 -year-old, shopping anywhere is a full-day event," she says. "This is so much easier."

The incredible selection — as well as the need for speed — will only increase as membership continues to grow, say those in the business.

Many of the sites, which used to focus on clothes, shoes and jewelry, are also branching out. For example, New York City-based ideeli now offers home decor, electronics, travel and entertainment, says founder and CEO Paul Hurley. It's all part of giving buyers "access to things they want across all categories."

Online sample sales

Ideeli Typical savings: 50 percent to 80 percent

Boutique frequency: Eight-12 sales each week

Past brands: Celine, Oscar de la Renta, Christian Dior, Michael Kors

Returns: Yes, on select apparel and shoes

Referral bonus: \$25 credit upon the invitee's first purchase

Why it's fab: This site holds frequent giveaways — prizes have included designer handbags, concert tickets and vacations. While basic membership is free, paid memberships provide early access to boutiques and other promotions.

To join: Star-Telegram readers can use this URL: www.ideeli.com, code: fwst