

# FASHION

## New Customers Push Retailers To Rethink Plus

Young, stylish shoppers looking for bigger sizes represent a chance to boost sales **BY LINDSEY RUPP**

For as long as there's been plus-size women's clothing, there's been a plus-size stigma attached to it. Retailers hide the clothes, sizes 14 and up, in the basements of their stores, far away from the rest of womenswear. The tops, pants, and dresses are big and boxy, typically concealing a woman's shape.

The message isn't only about hiding your curves. It also says, as the actress Melissa McCarthy told fashion site Refinery29, "You're not really worthy."

# 65%

Share of U.S. female shoppers buying plus sizes

Spurred by online retailers, social media, and celebrities like McCarthy, larger sizes are gaining acceptance and visibility. Established companies from **Target** to teen chain **Charlotte Russe** introduced plus-size collections this year. New labels like e-commerce brand **Universal Standard** are updating larger-

size looks. The company's first eight-piece collection of minimal designs went on sale in September. The momentum, says Marshal Cohen, a retail analyst with research firm NPD Group, will pick up next year. "Some retailers are going to make a big deal of plus size in 2016," he says.

McCarthy has been a force pulling the \$19.9 billion market for plus-size clothing in the U.S. into the mainstream. After several designers refused to make her a dress for the 2012 Academy Awards, she created her own line, **Melissa McCarthy Seven7**. Introduced in August, the clothing comes in sizes 4 to 28 and sells on Home Shopping Network. **Nordstrom** and **Macy's** (page 125) stock only the plus sizes of her line. McCarthy is pitching the stores to



From the Seven7 collection

→ **CONT.**



McCarthy

take the full collection and display all sizes together.

Rebel Wilson also has been outspoken about a fashion industry that hasn't always catered to her shape. In November the actress added her name to a line of clothes from **Torrid**, a women's and teen plus-size chain with stores across the U.S.

That growing visibility isn't only in stores. Bloggers and news sites such as Refinery29 are covering larger-size clothing along with other fashion trends. "Look at social media, look at movies, TV, music," says the designer Rachel Roy, who's preparing a "curvy" collection that will go on sale early next year. "The difference is that people are starting to actually pay attention to it, talk about it, and act on it now."

With 65 percent of female shoppers buying plus sizes, major stores can't ignore the market. "As retailers are looking for growth, they'd be hard-pressed not to consider this customer," says Mariah Chase, chief executive officer of **Eloquii**, an online fast-fashion retailer of plus clothing. Eloquii was started by the Limited in 2011, closed in 2013, and revived by employees and investor John Auerbach last year as an independent company. Its sales tripled in its first year, Chase says, and are projected to top \$20 million this year. "There's buying power," she says.

**Lane Bryant**, the national plus-size chain owned by Ascena Retail Group and a mainstay in the market, has seen sales rise over the last three fiscal years. The brand accounted for 25 percent of the parent company's revenue last quarter. Sales at Lane Bryant stores and online rose 3 percent in the fourth quarter from a year earlier. The brand attributes the growth to new ads tackling stereotypes in the fashion industry. One video, featured on Lane Bryant's social media pages, shows plus-size models

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Universal Standard



in their underwear striking sexy poses and saying, "No one's ignoring us anymore," as #PlusIsEqual flashes on the screen.

For brick-and-mortar retailers, limited floor space has dictated whether they carry such lines. Plus sizes historically have been one of the first to go when another product, such as handbags, starts driving sales. "This is a market that was really not taken care of. There was no love," says Gerard Guez, CEO of **Sunrise Brands**, which manufactures McCarthy's line. But today's plus-size customer is different and demanding that retailers pay attention, he says. And she's doing a lot of shopping on the Internet. "The biggest opportunity is online," where retailers can and do carry more merchandise, says Kathy Bradley-Riley, senior vice president for merchandising at retail and fashion advisory firm Doneger Group. Says Guez: "There's certainly a market that's just waking up, and instead of telling people to lose weight, the message is love yourself the way you are."

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