

Shopping catalogs making a comeback

NoRemote

J.C. Penney is reviving its print catalog. It stopped publishing the "Big Book" six years ago, but now other retailers are taking a page from the original form of virtual shopping, reports CBS News correspondent John Blackstone.

Julie Stephens and Stacy Weingarten are thoroughly modern women who often turn back the clock when they shop, abandoning their electronic devices for print catalogs.

"It has so many gorgeous pictures. It's so easy to flip through. It's almost like a statement piece on your coffee table," Weingarten said.

"I'll see how Anthropologie will put things together and I'll be like 'Oh, that's good!'" Stephens said.

Catalogs are making a comeback, but they are not your grandmother's catalogs.

"I think the catalogs today are much more about entertainment and fun and giving people ideas," said Denise Lee Yohn, retail consultant and author of "What Great Brands Do."

"It's less about the sale and more about the entire shopping experience," Yohn said.



In the Williams-Sonoma test kitchen in San Francisco, recipes are tested before they're published in their catalog. It reads like a high-end cookbook.

Laura Alber is the CEO of Williams-Sonoma Inc. the parent company for seven brands including Pottery Barn and West Elm.

Even though she could just send an email, she said "people love the catalogs."

"They're not just sales-generating tools, they help people decorate," Alber said.

In the studio where Pottery Barn's catalog is created, data-mining guides the designs. It also helps determine how life events, like a new baby or new home, might change customer preferences.

"In the same way we have great artists, we have great data scientists," Alber said. "They study the response rate from every customer that we mailed it to."

It turns out most catalog readers spend more money, both online and in stores.

"They dog-ear it, they bring it to the stores, they show it to their friends," she said.

It's not just women who want catalogs. In 2007, Andy Dunn started a menswear brand, "Bonobos." He launched online then later opened brick-and-mortar stores. Now, Bonobos is going old school, creating catalogs that are more like travelogues. Their latest is set in New Orleans.

"The music is in your face, the food is so good. A guy doesn't necessarily want to read about clothes, he wants to read about the world, and learn about clothing almost inadvertently," Dunn said.

Twenty percent of their first-time customers are placing orders after having received a catalog. But catalogs didn't

start out telling tales of faraway places. In the late 1800s mail-order catalogs were simple descriptions of what you could buy from enterprising, but far away, merchants.

Even Williams-Sonoma's early catalog was a simple affair. But the goal was the same: use the catalog to build a connection.

"The customer feels a bond to the brand," Yohn said. "Something that isn't necessarily achieved through a quick TV ad or online."

There are, of course, those who don't want their mailbox crammed with catalogs. There's a Facebook page devoted to stopping Restoration Hardware's bulk-mailing weighing close to 14 pounds. But those who want them can give you a catalog of reasons why.

"It really inspires me and makes me want to travel all the time," Stephens said.

"I want to tell the sales rep this is exactly what I want; I want my room to look like this," Weingarten added.

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