



Designers at Debenhams comes of age

The retailer's collaboration with top designers is celebrating its 21st birthday. Gemma Goldfingle charts its growth from 'risky move' to core offer

Celebrities and fashionistas will be lining the front rows as London Fashion Week kicks off today. But designer fashion not only gets the stars out, it also brings out shoppers. And high street retailers have been vying to capitalise on that.

Among them is department store group Debenhams, one of the first to launch a designer collaboration 21 years ago this month. Designers at Debenhams has become a core part of its offer and now accounts for 16.9% of the retailer's sales.

"It's given us a real point of difference," says Debenhams group trading director Suzanne Harlow, who has played a key role in developing the concept in her 20 years at the department store. "If you ask customers why they shop with us, one of the top three reasons is Designers at Debenhams."

Ben de Lisi was one of the first designers to team up with Debenhams two decades ago. He did not view the move from boutique to high street as a risk, even back then.

"It wasn't a risk at all," he says. "There was a clear division between the shoppers at my Belgravia shop and Debenhams shoppers. My shoppers didn't cross over [to] the high street," he observes.

However, he admits there were some critics of his decision to work with Debenhams.

"A lot of people thought I'd sold my

soul to the devil," he recalls. "But I took a decision to guarantee the future of my brand. I didn't realise the Ben de Lisi brand had value. Debenhams helped me realise it."

Jeff Banks also encountered some naysayers when he joined Debenhams' designer roster 13 years ago.

"A lot of people frowned about it. It was seen as going over to the dark side," he says. "For me it wasn't such a big deal though. I was presenting a TV show at the time so was a familiar face in middle England."

"I thought it was a really efficient way to get high-quality fashion to the public, cutting out the middleman."

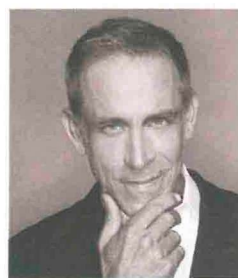
Banks says that designing and manufacturing products with Debenhams cuts out wholesale partners and makes his products cheaper for the consumer.

Still going strong

Shoppers have clearly lapped it up. Now Debenhams' designers span every category from footwear to furni-

ture. The retailer has 20 designers in its stable, and some of its earliest collaborators such as Jasper Conran, as well as de Lisi, are still on board.

Since the launch of Designers at Debenhams, how shoppers buy fashion has changed completely. There is no such thing as a 'designer shopper' any longer. People are now happy to mix and match Prada and Primark and de Lisi believes that Debenhams



"DEBENHAMS GIVES ME THE AUTONOMY TO CREATE WHAT I WANT. IT'S THE BEST DECISION I EVER MADE"
Ben de Lisi, designer



Above: the Designers team with Debenhams boss Michael Sharp. Collections include Jasper Conran (right) and Todd Lynn (far right)



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Jeff Banks, designer



helped bring about that change in shopping behaviour.

"It think it single-handedly changed the relationship between the high street and designers. Debenhams made the fashion industry in the UK inclusive," he maintains.

Harlow says when Debenhams first devised the concept it wanted to make "designers accessible to all".

"Back then, designers were purely runway shows," she says. "It was seen as not for the masses. Customers now feel they can buy into designers and it's not something that is so far removed that they could never be part of it."

The success of its designer ranges has paved the way for further collaborations across the high street. From Giles Deacon at New Look to Temperley's Somerset collection at John Lewis and the raft of collaborations that have shoppers queuing outside H&M each season, the high street can seem awash with designer names.

However, Banks argues that Debenhams' proposition is distinctive.

"The difference with Debenhams is that it took the designers to the heart of its business," he says. "It doesn't just use their names. It made them into a unique proposition – a brand. It's not just Stella doing something for Adidas.

"It's quite unique worldwide. Other than Myers in Australia, no one else has created an in-house design team and manufacturing capability."

De Lisi agrees. "Others have tried it but they've done it half-heartedly," he says. "They've thought that their private brands are more valuable.

"Debenhams was savvy enough to realise that designers who have worked in their trade for years can add value to its business."

Harlow says that as well as "defining its fashion credentials", Debenhams' designer collaborations also allow it to stretch its price architecture.

"It can push us a bit further than we might be able to do with our own ranges. It will set a benchmark. We can push prices more, we can develop more premium products and we can take more risks in terms of fashion," she says.

"Because customers believe in designers they're happy to pay £300 for a Todd Lynn jacket. It endorses that there's been strong design input into it."

The department store group's collaborations are viewed as long-term tie-ups rather than fleeting liaisons.

"When people do one-off collaborations, that's an entirely different thing to what we do. We want this to be a long-term, sustainable and a significant part of the overall business," says Harlow.

Banks says this offers designers certainty in what can be a very unstable world. "It gives designers security. You don't have that nerve-wracking wait to see if you're going to be stocked next season."

He also credits the team behind Designers at Debenhams with its success. The collection has been led by Michael Sharp and Harlow, now chief executive and trading director of the department store group respectively.

"They're not bean counters; they're passionate about product and they understand the consumer," says Banks. "They take an idea and like a rugby player they battle to get it through. If a collection isn't working, they are prepared to work with the designers to get it right, even if that means giving it a few seasons."

Authentic approach

Part of the reason Designers at Debenhams has been so successful is because it is authentic, according to Banks.

He says the designers take a hands-on approach to the collaboration, from design to visiting manufacturers to the brand photography. "It's no different to creating my own collection," he says.

In fact, Edition designer Todd Lynn says that he has the same customer in





mind when he designs his Debenhams collection. "They may have different budgets, but I think of them on an aesthetic level. Aesthetically they like the same things," he says.

There may be a greater level of design engineering to ensure the product is created to suit the price point of the customer but Lynn says he is impressed by how well manufactured the products are.

"They've done a beautiful job with the manufacturing. They're vigilant about quality control," he says.

De Lisi also applauds Debenhams' decision to team up with designers rather than go down the road of celebrity collaborations as rivals River Island and Topshop have with Rihanna and Kate Moss. He says that has built Debenhams' image as a fashion authority.

"If you have an operation you go to the doctor - people know the same applies with design," he says.

Nurturing design talent

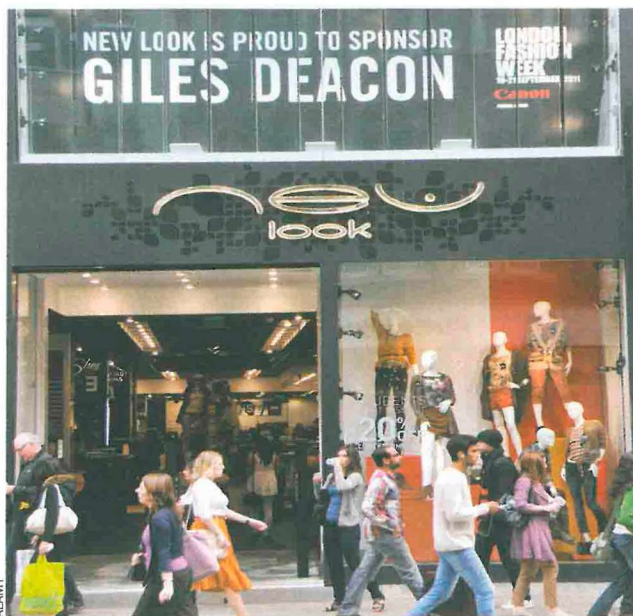
By bringing designer fashion to the high street, Debenhams has given designers a much-needed commercial outlet.

"The number of stores is diminishing and diminishing," says Banks. "It's hard for designers to get their designs in front of the public these days. Debenhams is giving them a platform."

De Lisi says that linking with high street retailers can also help fund designers' own collections, and that was behind his own decision to work with Debenhams. "If Stella or Alexander McQueen were on their own steam would they have been so big?" he asks. "Without money it is nigh on impossible to make it in this industry."

Debenhams has developed its relationship with up-and-coming talent with the launch of its Edition concept in 2011. Two to four designers showcase under the Edition label every season, and they have included London Fashion Week favourites Preen and Jonathan Saunders.

Canadian Lynn, who has dressed rock stars including Bono and Mick Jagger, is its most recent recruit. He launched a womenswear collection for Edition last autumn which has expanded into handbags this autumn,



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with a range which will soon be in Debenhams' stores.

He says: "Edition is really important because it's a way of getting a snapshot of brands that have an identity that is a little bit forward."

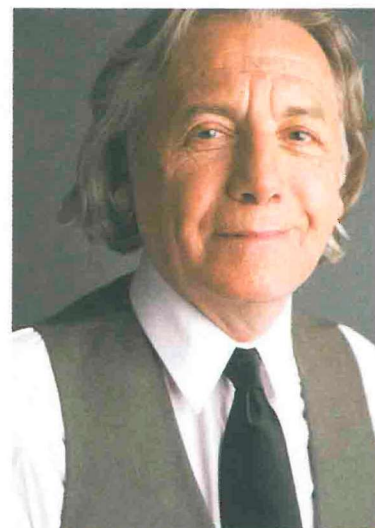
Lynn says the tie-up has helped build awareness and has the potential to attract new customers to his brand.

"It definitely helps with branding. I don't think of them as different customers. There is always potential that the customer will cross over," he says.

Lynn also says Debenhams is eager to promote and build his image in a true and fair light.

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Todd Lynn, designer



Jeff Banks appreciates how Debenhams places designers in a central role, rather than just "using their names"

And 20 years down the line, de Lisi hopes the dramatic impact Debenhams had in making designer fashion more accessible has silenced his critics.

"I'd like to think people respected me for making a savvy business decision about what was right for my brand."

"Fashion is not just about drawing fancy designs. It's a business. Debenhams gives me complete autonomy to create what I want to create. It's the best decision I ever made," he adds.

So rather than just identifying trends this fashion week, designers and retailers alike will be trying to identify potential collaborators too.

DESIGNERS ON THE HIGH STREET OTHER BIG SUCCESSSES

■ H&M with Karl Lagerfeld, 2004

Lagerfeld was H&M's first high-profile designer collaboration. The range sold out within hours in some larger stores and spurred further designer collaborations with H&M including Isabel Marant, Stella McCartney and Maison Martin Margiela.

■ New Look with Giles Deacon, 2007

Deacon's wares became available at the most accessible of places, value fashion retailer New Look in 2007. The collaboration lasted for several seasons

and led to a Giles Deacon nail varnish range.

■ John Lewis and Alice Temperley

Alice Temperley launched her Somerset collection (right) exclusively with John Lewis in 2011. It became the fastest-selling brand in the department store's history.

■ Uniqlo and Jil Sander

German designer Jil Sander's minimalist designs were a great fit for Japanese brand Uniqlo. The collaboration lasted two years.

■ Topshop and Kate Moss

Although she is not technically a designer, it is impossible to ignore the impact that Moss's creations with Topshop have had on the high street. The model became synonymous with boho style and her first collection for Topshop hit that trend perfectly. There was hysteria outside some Topshop stores before the



collection's launch and it took £3m in its first week. After a four-year hiatus, Topshop boss Sir Philip Green (pictured left with Moss) signed the supermodel up for a new collection this year.

