



Inside Sophie's Closet

A personal fascination for jewellery sees Sophie Katirai handpicking most of the vintage items displayed in her online boutique, while still having an open mind about establishing a brick-and-mortar presence to complement her website. **RetailME** follows her retail journey...

It was a television show featuring fashion-forward celebrities in designer dresses and jewellery that sparked the desire in Sophie Katirai to have a jewellery collection of her own. Then came the thought: "If I desire jewellery so much, surely women in Dubai would want it as much."

That spark ignited the founding of Sophie's Closet (www.sophiescloset.com), the region's first online fashion jewellery store. Of course, Katirai's decision was backed by her extensive experience in online shopping. "Sophie's Closet didn't start from any one point. It was a combination of all the things I'd experienced in life. My mom was a gemmologist and my dad an antique collector so I grew up with jewellery around me," she recalls.

Born in Canada and raised in the UAE, Katirai travelled the world to add to her precious collection. When she returned to the UAE after completing her MBA in Vancouver, the economic recession had just struck Dubai and businesses were downing shutters, with individual-owned boutique stores taking a major hit. Katirai found herself turning to websites based abroad to fulfil her craving for all things

that sparked.

"Dubai didn't have that many online stores then as it does now. I was buying everything from abroad. That's when I thought I'd like to share all of these things I was buying for myself by starting something online," she informs.

Katirai launched her website in 2008 and immediately faced her first challenge - finding customers willing to experiment with online shopping. "People weren't too comfortable with shopping online in the beginning. I remember my earliest customers would call or send an email to place an order even though they'd visited the website to see the items they desired. They wanted a connection with a real person so they'd call or send an email with images from the website," she points out.

It took a couple of years and a string of happy customers to get people to order fashion jewellery online, Katiraj adds.

She sources her jewellery from international brands and fashion designers, usually contacting them personally to buy a piece. She hasn't as yet ventured into the wholesale business so, more often than not, handpicking each piece showcased on her website.

"I'd say 99% of our collection belongs

to us since I buy everything from the designers and then sell. We're not into consignments as yet so it all belongs to Sophie's Closet," Katiraj says.

Sourcing vintage jewellery is a different ball game that follows a long chain leading all the way to estate buyers. "It isn't one person selling everything. Vintage pieces usually belong to people who have passed away or have sold them. There are estate buyers who buy things from such sources and I have contacts with people who do this business in different cities. They show me the jewellery they have and I buy from them," Katirai explains.

All the items featured on sophiescloset.com are on display at Katirai's headquarters that doubles as a showroom. Located in Single Business Tower, Business Bay (Dubai), the office showroom comforts customers who are still queasy about online shopping. "Many customers aren't too comfortable spending AED5,000-10,000 on, maybe, a purse they haven't seen, so that's the reason we started displaying everything. Our showroom is for clients who want to see, touch and feel the item they wish to buy. However, we don't want to go away from

an online boutique to become an actual physical store like the rest," she avers.

Katirai ensures constant electronic communication between her showroom and website to keep the two in sync. That's again a learning from her experiences as an online shopper in Dubai – when she sometimes found a product she had ordered showing up as 'out of stock' after she had completed the purchase. "Our online stock is connected to whatever we have physically. If someone buys an item from the showroom, the order is placed on the system and the item goes off the website," she elaborates.

Katirai had switched platforms from ASPX to Magento a year ago to enhance

her website but a bit of 'bad advice' saw her losing traffic. "One of the developers recommended Wordpress, which I wasn't too comfortable with. In the process, things weren't done correctly and the redirects weren't proper, so we lost some ranking and traffic," she informs.

Katirai has cleaned up the mess since the beginning of the year and says traffic to the website now averages 800 visitors per day, with visits usually converting to sales.

The website has also changed its advertising from a softer word-of-mouth approach to a more aggressive social media presence. "We didn't really spend money on advertising initially because happy customers would usually tell

others and that's how we grew. We started paying for online advertising since the past two years so we now have Google ads, Facebook ads and, of course, a lot of social media. In fact I think one of our main strengths is our social media presence - Sophie's Closet is there on all the top platforms," Katirai points out.

One of the things she's proud of is her website's repertoire of designers, which has grown from four or five to almost 50 designers now. "There's one other thing I'm really proud of – we represent Ciner, one of the oldest jewellery companies in the world started in 1892 and based in New York. We will be representing them in the Middle East and distributing to GCC countries," Katiraj adds.



Advice for online start-ups

Here are some pointers for those looking to foray into the worldwide web of online selling:

- Social media is a very important platform, use it;
 - A website platform is important and must not be ignored;
 - Search engine optimisation (SEO) is essential to spread the word about you;
 - Don't compromise on original content;
 - Be passionate and dedicated.
- It's not like you are a store in a mall and customers will see you when they visit the mall. In the online world, you won't be noticed unless you are different and you are good.
- Keep an eye on the pricing. It's easy to compare prices on the internet.

A wish unfulfilled

Sophie Katirai's collection features regularly in the leading fashion magazines across the world, such as Vogue, Cosmopolitan and Women's Health, to name a few. But what's the one piece of jewellery Sophie wanted from her store but could not have?

"There was this really beautiful tiara by Siman Tu. He closed store in a hurry as he wanted to attend to his mother whose health had been failing. I thought I'd ask him to make me a tiara like the one featured in Sophie's Closet. But he'd downed the shutters of his shop before I could send him my request. And when I checked with the website to get the tiara, I found it had been sold two weeks ago," she says.

Sophie says she's been hoping since then that the designer would return to work. Wonder if Siman Tu is listening?

She considers her latest collection her 'achievement of the year', made especially for Sophie's Closet with the 'Ciner for Sophie' tag. What makes the achievement sweeter is that she collaborated with the brand's design team to fashion the pieces.

In the physical store versus online space debate, Katirai is still undecided on whether she would want to have a physical store in future, though she believes it's best to have both as they 'complement each other'. "Online is convenient since you can shop anytime you want, wherever you are. But shopping at stores is fun because it's something you can do with friends and family and experience the product before buying it. It would be nice to have both, but for now opening a physical store is still a question mark for us," she concludes. ■