

# MAGAZINE **femail**

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High Street fashion stores are now using U.S.-style, hard-sell tactics. We investigate the tricks of the trade ...

## Why, when a shop assistant says you look fabulous, you should never believe her

**L**ET me put that into a fitting room for you.' 'Wow, that looks amazing!' 'You should try that with this top, they look fabulous together.' 'I'll just get you a pair of shoes to go with them, size 6, right?' 'My name's Lucy, do let me know if you need *anything* at all.'

If you've been shopping on the High Street recently, these phrases will probably be familiar to you. Because in the past few years, the UK seems to have changed from being a nation of shopkeepers that could barely be bothered to stop gossiping with their friends to acknowledge your presence, into a terrifying army of highly trained sales ninjas who will say and do anything

*by Claire Coleman*

to try to part you from your money. Last week in French Connection, on London's Oxford Street, I'd barely picked up a vest when an assistant was offering to open a new till so I could pay for it there and then.

In Reiss, on Regent Street, I just wanted to try on one skirt, but before I knew it there were three tops, three jackets and a pair of heels being pressed into my arms. And despite what the sales assistant was trying to tell me, none of them looked right. Mentioning this to friends, I

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Picture: JAMES ROBINSON

**In the bag: Claire Coleman discovers the tricks behind the hard sell**

### Speed read: Swimsuits

IT TAKES one svelte figure, virtually no bust and a lot of pre-holiday preparation to look half decent in a bikini, so we're thrilled to see the return of the swimsuit this summer. They're becoming so popular that the fashion industry has given them a new name, the monokini. How 2010. The rise of the one-piece falls in line with the return of minimalist, conservative-chic. Think sky blues, reds, creams and black. The swimsuit must act as the key building block of your holiday wardrobe, so keep it simple. For inspiration, look to Heidi Klein, the doyenne of grown-up swimwear, who has taken some classic designs in taupe, blue and scarlet and added bows or ruffles. All aboard!

**22 pc**  
of women would rather cover up than wear a bikini on the beach. The average woman has three swimsuits in her wardrobe



#### HOW TO WEAR:

**PLAIN:** Prints draw attention to all the wrong places. Keep colours plain and simple, or go for stripes, ticking or polka dots, which give variation to a classic cut.  
**WITH DETAIL:** One of the joys of a plain outfit is that you have free rein to throw on as many accessories as you want. The same applies here.  
**HALTERNECK:** The one-piece allows you to experiment with an array of necklines. Halternecks are easily the most elegant since they pronounce your collarbone while keeping you supported.



#### SHOPPING CHECKLIST:

- White halterneck, £155, [heidiklein.com](http://heidiklein.com)
- Princesse Tam Tam bandeau, £93.50, [johnlewis.com](http://johnlewis.com)
- Stripe, £28, [accessorize.com](http://accessorize.com)

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discovered everyone had a story to tell. From being pounced on the minute they set foot in a store (Ted Baker), to having every garment they looked at hustled off to a fitting room (Oasis) and — my favourite — trying on dresses so small that the zip wouldn't do up and being told that it would 'give' a bit (French Connection).

But it's not just in London. Across the country, shop staff are crossing that fine line between being helpful, into the sort of territory formerly occupied by double-glazing salesmen.

In Bristol, a colleague was at the counter in Urban Outfitters buying a playsuit when the assistant from the fitting room popped up with two pairs of shoes, several necklaces, a belt and a cardigan that 'you might like to mix and match with it'.

An undercover shopper in Cardiff tells of trying on a white lacy dress from the bridal section of Monsoon and asking one of the shop's workers if she could get away with it as a guest at a wedding. 'Yes, it should be fine,' said the sales assistant. Fine if you want to start World War III.

**A** FRIEND from Manchester relates an experience in Burberry where she made it clear she was after a summery dress, only to be subjected to the hard sell on a trench coat.

'They gave me all the spiel about it being a classic British piece, even though I wasn't even looking for a coat. I ended up agreeing to take a business card just so I could escape.' Perhaps, given the economic climate, it's not surprising that the sort of high-pressure selling tactics that are commonplace in the U.S. should have made their way here.

After all, a Confederation of British Industry report revealed that sales on the High Street last month were lower than a year ago and, according to Ian McCafferty, CBI chief economic adviser, another year-on-year fall is expected in June.

'Retail conditions look to remain fragile. It appears shoppers are feeling the pinch again and are being cautious with their purchases,' he said.

Shoppers might be trying to be cautious, but they're up against some serious opposition if they want to hold on to their cash.

A recent feature in New York magazine profiled Japanese brand Uniqlo. It revealed that every morning, before the store opens, staff are expected to practice what are known as 'The Behaviours' — the ways they interact with customers.

These range from how they return a credit card to a customer (Japanese style, with two hands and full eye contact) to six standard phrases every Uniqlo worker worldwide is expected to use.

They include: 'Did you find everything you were looking for?' and 'Let me know if you need anything — my name is \*\*\*\*'. As a result, in any Uniqlo store you walk into in Britain, you can expect to be greeted, and treated, in exactly the same way.

And even homegrown British stores are starting to follow suit. Emma works in LK Bennett. 'We don't get given a script, but certain things are drummed into you,' she tells me.

'We're taught the five steps that should get you a sale — from the welcome to establishing what the customer might buy, to ultimately closing the sale. And there are other little things we have to do. If a customer wants to try on a pair of shoes, you have to bring them the pair they want plus two other options.

You also have to show every customer who's trying on shoes or clothes a handbag. Plus with shoe customers, you're meant to try to sell them shoe care as well.'

According to Emma, while LK



'When I started, it was all about customer service. Now it's just sell, sell, sell'

Bennett sales assistants have always worked on commission (currently 1 per cent), the company recently introduced what it calls Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for every member of the sales team.

'These are essentially sales targets for all areas, and they are monitored weekly. So sales have gone from being simply about supplementing your basic pay with commission, to something the job could be riding on.'

'As a result, I know people who will try anything to get a sale. They'll tell you things look good on you when they don't, or encourage you to buy something and bring it back if you change your mind, when they know full well most people don't bother, especially as you have to return it within a week to get a full refund.'

In Hobbs, it's a similar story, accord-

ing to Caroline, who works part-time in one of their London stores.

'Everything's on the push because of the recession. Our targets are higher than last year's. We've been told just surviving isn't enough, we have to aim to expand.'

In Hobbs, individual sales staff don't work on commission; the shop as a whole is set a target and then the manager sets each individual salesperson a target as well.

'If we meet our monthly target as a shop, then we'll get a bonus. It starts at about £50 for part-time sales staff and then I presume it goes up,' explains Caroline. 'The manager also sets us mini challenges in store. I may be, whoever sells the most things that day gets a bottle of wine. Every time we make a sale it's recorded and tallied up at the end of the day.'

THE TRICKS — AND HOW

**THE SELL:** Saying you have to take a minimum number of items into the fitting room and deliberately giving you basics or items that co-ordinate with your choice in the hope you'll be tempted.

**AVOID BY:** Only trying on the things you intended to try on. Ignore anything that you didn't pick out.

**THE SELL:** Offering you tops, jackets or shoes to try on with the item you picked up to try to upsell or increase the number of things you buy.

**AVOID BY:** Shop in basics and take a pair heels.

**THE SELL:** Telling you that you can bring an item back if you don't like it to try to get a definite sale.

**AVOID BY:** Checking the small print of their returns

policy and also looking for the possibility that you'll return it in time, ask to look elsewhere or have a look elsewhere or have a look elsewhere.

**THE SELL:** Trying to get you to buy more so you can get a discount.

**AVOID BY:** Thinking about the discount you can get on more than 20 per cent off, the discount won't be as good as you think if you're not spending enough. It will take to go through the sale to save a lot, and as soon as the card is not tempted to us, it's not.

No cashback is payable in any month in which the minimum payment is not received by the due date. The minimum amount you need to pay us each month will be 10% of the total amount owing or £50, whichever is more. No cashback is payable on Cash Withdrawals, Interest, Fees, Balance Transfers, amounts subsequently re-credited to your account due to refunds, or expenditure in any one month exceeding the amount of your Credit Limit. No cashback is payable if you end the agreement before the relevant Card Anniversary Date or if, in the 12 months preceding your Card Anniversary Date, the aggregate amount of all transactions (other than cash advances and balance transfers) totals less than £3,000. Subject to the above a cashback of 5% will be payable to you by us on all transactions made in the first 3 months up to £100 and applied at the same time as any annual cashback. An annual cashback on the aggregate amount of all transactions (other than the exclusions stated above and any introductory offer) will be payable to you by us and calculated at the following rates, 0.5% for aggregate amounts up to £3,500; and 1% for aggregate amounts from £3,501 to £7,500; and 1.25% for aggregate amounts in excess of £7,501. A dormancy fee of £20 per year will be payable by you if the aggregate amount of all transactions, other than cash advances and balance transfers, that have taken place during the preceding 12 months is £0. American Express may vary the %APR, interest rates and other charges from time to time. Written details available on request. Applicants must be 18 years old or over. Approval subject to status and terms and conditions apply. The Platinum Cashback Credit Card is offered by American Express Services Europe Limited, Registered in England and Wales with Number 1833139. American Express Services Europe Limited is authorised by the Financial Services Authority under the Payment Services Regulations 2009 (reference number 415532) for the provision of payment services. \*Source: Moneysupermarket.com as of 04.05.10.

**IF YOU HAVE ONLY ... 5 MINUTES**  
**MAKE** a cordial by pouring 3 litres of boiling water over  
**and 25 rinsed elderflower heads. Cover with a tea towel**

## WHICH STORE'S THE PUSHIEST?

LAST week, our undercover shoppers visited a number of shops in five UK cities, here are the worst offenders.

### REISS, BULLRING SHOPPING CENTRE, BIRMINGHAM

**Time to approach:** Two seconds. The minute I walked in the door, I was asked if I was looking for something in particular and within two minutes two other assistants had approached me. **Sales pitch:** When I went to try on a dress, the assistant lurked outside the changing room, asking me through the curtain if I needed any help. When I told her I didn't like the dress, she insisted on getting me another dress to try. **Pushy factor:** 6/10

### GUESS, CABOT CIRCUS, BRISTOL

**Time to approach:** Two minutes. It was quite late in the day and there were only a few staff on the shopfloor, so I actually had to approach an assistant myself when I wanted to try a waistcoat in a different size. **Sales pitch:** When they didn't have my size, the assistant suggested the extra small would probably fit, as they're 'meant to be tight'. I could barely do it up and it hurt my stomach, but she assured me it was 'meant to be like that'. Another corset-style dress I tried gaped at the bust and the hips, but she insisted it fitted, and brought me a pair of sandals she said looked great with it. **Pushy factor:** 8/10

### OASIS, ST. DAVID'S CENTRE, CARDIFF

**Time to approach:** Three seconds. I was just through the door before an assistant offered help and, as I browsed, another asked if I was finding the right size. When I asked for a size 8 in a white shift dress, she checked the stock and then called other shops, but couldn't track one down. **Sales pitch:** She suggested I tried the ten. It gaped at the top and was too clingy at the bottom. She told me it looked lovely and much better on me than on most people who tried it. When I mentioned it was for a wedding, and I wasn't sure white was suitable for a guest, she didn't even hesitate

before saying: 'I think it'll be absolutely fine. Until you asked me, I hadn't even thought of that dress as white.' **Pushy factor:** 10/10

### FRENCH CONNECTION, OXFORD STREET, LONDON

**Time to approach:** Five seconds. An assistant greeted me as soon as I walked into the store and another asked me if I needed help. When I told her I was looking for a specific top in a specific colour, she went off to look for it. **Sales pitch:** The assistant came back with the top I'd asked for and another two as well 'in case I liked them'. She immediately offered to open a till so I could pay. I kept looking and had barely touched a dress when another assistant appeared and offered to put it in the fitting room.

I tried on two dresses — one that was indecently short, the other far too tight on the bust — but the assistant at the fitting room told me both looked great and suggested I bought them and tried them at home, as I could bring them back if I didn't like them. **Pushy factor:** 8/10

### OASIS, ARNDALE CENTRE, MANCHESTER

**Time to approach:** Thirty seconds. I started looking around and was asked what I was looking for. When I said a dress for a baptism, she led me round the store and started piling dresses over her arm. **Sales pitch:** On the way to the fitting room, she picked up jewellery she said would go with the dresses. After I tried one on that didn't fit on the bust and was far too short for daywear, she told me it looked fantastic.

I expressed doubt and she suggested a cardigan, and brought back three. I tried another dress on and she started piling bracelets on to my arms and telling me about a pair of jeans that would look great under the dress. **Pushy factor:** 9/10



## How to wear leather... without looking like J-Lo



Picture: WENN.COM

WHILE a leather jacket in winter might well be a wardrobe staple, anyone donning leather in summer was until recently a biker, a rocker, a goth or a deviant.

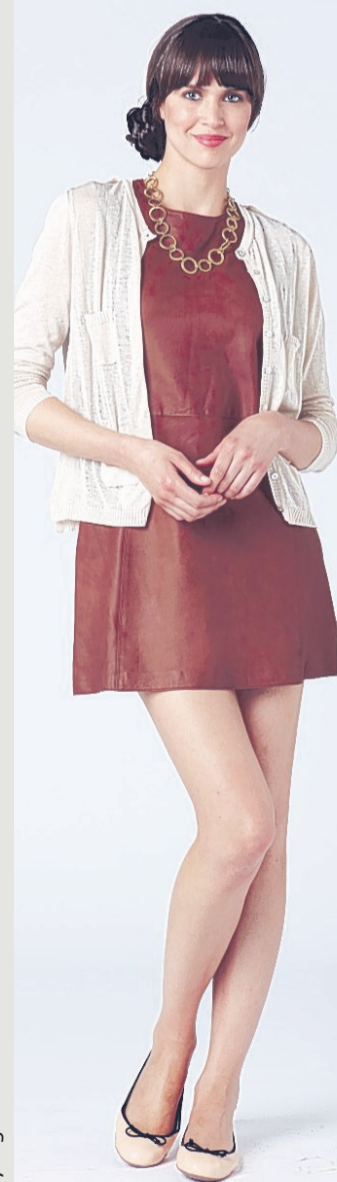
But that's simply not the case this season. In one of fashion's inexplicable foibles, designers from Hermes and Balmain to Alexander Wang and Louis Vuitton decided that leather was a key look for the season — and not just for shoes. Skirts, shorts, dresses and even jumpsuits in soft hides were spotted at the shows.

Leather can give a wonderfully sleek and clean silhouette, and that's part of its allure. Unfortunately, nobody thought to mention that to J-Lo (pictured left) when she recently rocked a black leather dress on the red carpet and ended up looking like she was wearing a terribly expensive bin bag.

So how do you get it right? For a start, steer entirely clear of black leather, opting instead for earthy, nude tones. And avoid mixing leather with other catwalk looks like ruffles, or the trend for volume, it just screams fashion victim.

Look for statement separates that can be dressed up or down and will carry you through endless seasons, summer or winter, for years to come.

CLAIRE COLEMAN



Styling: MAYA OAKLEY. Pictures: MARK BOND

Dress £99, cardigan £29, Zara, 020 7534 9500. Shoes £70, kurtgeiger.com. Necklace £40, johnlewis.com

Jacket £175, top £35, houseoffraser.co.uk. Jeans £49.99, Massimo Dutti, 020 7851 1280. Shoes £45, Next. Necklace £15, M&S

However, management don't just employ the carrot approach to encourage the hard sell, there's quite a lot of stick involved, too.

**R**UBY recently left Kurt Geiger after working with the company for eight years. 'Kurt Geiger is ruthless when it comes to selling. Mystery shoppers visit every store every month and the pass mark is 85 per cent. If any member of staff is scored below that three times, they're out, it's as simple as that.

You get marked on whether you greet the customer and whether you listen to the customer.

As a manager, if we met our monthly

targets I would get 1.75 per cent of my annual salary as bonus, but the sales girls' commission worked in a slightly different way.'

Ruby's staff were paid 1 per cent of their sales on top of their basic pay. In her shop on the outskirts of London, that pay was £5.50 an hour; she believes in other parts of the country it's even lower than that.

The minimum wage is £5.80 an hour. While it's legal to include commission in this figure, it means someone working a 20-hour week on £5.50 an hour would have to sell £600 worth of stock at 1 per cent commission just to be earning the minimum wage.

Ruby also reveals that there were other ways in which they were encouraged to pressure sell. 'If a shoe wasn't selling well, we'd be incentivised to sell more of them by getting 50p or £1 for

every pair we sold. And, if we didn't have a size in stock and could convince a customer to let us order it online for them, and get an email address that could be added to the database, we'd get £1. The store in the region that put through the most orders in a certain period would get a free pair of shoes for each staff member.'

Given this sort of environment, it's hardly surprising that Ruby admits to doing whatever was necessary.

'As a rule, I'd tell customers whatever they wanted to hear if it was going to get the money in my till.'

But is all this hard sell really working? A recent poll revealed that 52 per cent of those questioned would rather leave a shop empty-handed than have to put up with pushy or over-enthusiastic staff, even if there was something they wanted to buy.

Nicky Hambleton-Jones is a stylist and author. She is not surprised that the hard sell isn't working and believes pushiness actually encourages people to spend less, not more.

'Brits are far more reserved than Americans, so importing U.S.-style service just doesn't work over here. The hard sell doesn't come naturally, so it feels fake, and as shoppers we find it intrusive and intimidating to be constantly bombarded with information and attention.'

'The High Street might think high-pressure sales tactics drives profit, I actually think it drives customers elsewhere.'

■ SOME names have been changed.

## YOU CAN AVOID THEM

ng at your diary. If there's a re not going to be able to t them to hold it while you ve a coffee and a think.

et you to sign up for a store- discount on the goods.

out the discount. Usually it's ent, so unless you're spending n't buy you anything else. And, much, it's not worth the time igh the paperwork. But if you d can spare the time, sign up d arrives, cancel it so you're s interest rates are high.

**THE SELL:** Trying to sell you shoe care products to go with shoes, or jewellery to go with an outfit.

**AVOID BY:** Telling them you have something at home already. The only exception is when you're buying a pair of shoes in an unusual colour. If they have shoe polish to match, it's worth buying there and then.

**THE SELL:** Taking your details for a mailing list — often they'll get commission for doing this and you'll be bombarded with emails and mails for all eternity.

**AVOID BY:** Not giving out your details without knowing how and why they'll use them. If they insist, give an 'accidentally' mis-spelled email address.

er 900g granulated sugar, stir and cool. Add 2 sliced lemons  
well and stir occasionally over 24 hours. Strain and drink.