

How many new stores will they open?

Next time you're driving on the highway or trekking through southeastern Michigan, look around and start counting.

Target, Wal Mart, Circuit City, Best Buy, Bed, Bath & Beyond, Meijer, Mervyn's, T.J. Maxx, Pier One, Old Navy, Home Depot...

How many new stores do these national chain retailers plan to open? Is it conceivable that we and other communities have more than we need when it comes to this brand of shopping?

After all, this is Detroit. We like putting our automobiles to use. We don't mind putting 10 miles on our odometer in exchange for a trip to Wal Mart to stock up on toilet paper. If we run out of toilet paper, we're not going if the store is more than a couple blocks away. After all, we're driving, not walking.

I'm uncertain as to whether I have anything original to say about this retail phenomenon. It's nothing new. Business has become big, conglomerate (monopoly) business on a global scale. Reports about communities fighting the retailers in the building proposal stage are common. Just as common are reports of small, independent stores going out of business.

The question is whether the consumer public is interested in getting a realistic picture of what's going on here. Yes, we all like the convenience of getting our groceries, cosmetics, tube socks and a new plant for the bedroom in one trip at one store — one-stop shopping.

Yes, we all feel special and smart when we buy a microwave for 20 percent less than the price of the same item at a small appliance store.

But doesn't anyone feel a bit dominated? Like retail is a dictatorship? Increasingly, consumers are patronizing the same stores over and over, no matter what they need, no matter where they live — because that's what's available to them. The more big retailers that come, the more small ones that close down.

I don't like not having choices. I don't like making decisions that fail to reflect some degree of individuality. I don't like the idea that across the country someone just like me is standing in front of the very same product in the same merchandise department considering whether it would look good in the living room.

Worse than not having choices is thinking that you do, when you really don't.

True, there's something good beyond the convenience and pocketbook savings; there's the reliability factor. By replicating the same business model in different locations, large retailers give consumers something consistent, something they can count on.

It's the beauty of McDonald's; no matter where you go, you can count on that double cheeseburger being the same.

That McDonald's has essentially planted a store on every major thoroughfare, within, or within miles of, every town, big or small, off most highway exits and just about around every corner in the United States and other countries is a remarkable achievement.

In fact, I am so in awe of McDonald's that several years ago I called their Midwestern headquarters to ask how many McDonald's operated in the United States.

"We don't know," a baffled public relations representative told me.

"What do you mean, you don't know? You don't count?" I replied.

"Well, there are so many opening up..." she said.

"Still, even if you don't own them, you have to set them up, the franchises, right?"

"True, but we still don't know. There's always one opening up. At any given moment, a new McDonald's is opening its doors."

"Well, how many do you have in Michigan? Surely you know how many McDonald's restaurants there are in a single state?"

No, they didn't know that, either, she told me.

Like I said, this is nothing new, but do you want double cheeseburger versions of everything you buy?

Beyond the trends

Local style makers keep making fashion sense

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Sometimes, fashion seems silly and shallow — an extraneous and flimsy domain. Consider some of the concept creations revealed on the runway at seasonal shows in New York and Europe. Following the shows are the runway reports that analyze the trends and critique the designers' work. Later, fashion magazines emphasize select pieces from the shows, and, eventually, some of the designs trickle down into retail stores.

Yet, after all that hoopla, many, if not most, women hold back when it comes to fashion. Understandably, they're overwhelmed by the prospect of making sense of it all: their own taste, lifestyle, body type, budget and time limits; the fashion trends and the staggering amount and variety of clothing available. Suddenly, obtaining personal shopping services or one-on-one assistance doesn't sound so indulgent and outdated.

That's probably why metropolitan style makers like Anna Bassett, who owned the highly regarded but now closed women's specialty store Claire Pearone, are still in the game.



For travel in style: Comes Going Like Lynn's "Travel Wardrobe in a Bag," which includes this versatile ensemble.

Just over two weeks ago, Bassett joined Saks Fifth Avenue's Troy store as director of its personal shopping service, The Fifth Avenue Club.

"Most women today are very, very busy," says Bassett of women's need for assistance in building and updating wardrobes. Hectic schedules and limited time make assistance a necessity for many women, she says. "The lack of time is a very important factor," adds Bassett. "I think individuals are very rushed today."

Rushed is one way to describe women's lifestyles in an age when more women work and hold high-powered positions, while raising a family, than ever before.

"Harassed" is the term preferred by Lynn Portnoy, who worked with Bassett as a fashion buyer for Claire Pearone, which operated at Troy's Somerset Collection until 1991 and then in downtown Birmingham until closing in 1993.

Portnoy currently outfits local women at her Southfield retail store, Lynn Portnoy Women's Clothier. She's also the author of an on-going series of travel books for women under the title "Going Like Lynn."

While Bassett will be working with personal shopping associates at Saks to help them better meet customers' needs, Portnoy is taking personal shopping services to a new level.

Last December, she launched Going Like Lynn's "Travel Wardrobe in a Bag," a wardrobe of upscale, chic clothing that's assembled in a single bag and ready to carry on the plane for women on the go. Since taking the concept and her catalog to New York City for a trunk show, Portnoy has been taking orders from across the country.

One new customer called from a train by cell



Swaying style again: Anna Bassett, who owned the highly regarded but now closed women's fashion boutique Claire Pearone, has joined Saks in Troy as director of the store's personal shopping service, The Fifth Avenue Club.

phone. "She was having a fashion emergency because she was going somewhere. So I made up a care package and sent it. She kept everything," says Portnoy.

Basic pieces available in Portnoy's "Wardrobe in a Bag" include a wrinkle-resistant, washable gabardine jacket, skirt and pants set by Yohio, a cashmere sweater set and cotton T-shirts. Accessories, like faux pearls and a black lace shawl, give women what they need to dress up their basic pieces. The cost is about \$3,000, but Portnoy offers a less expensive "Wardrobe in a Bag" for \$600.

Each wardrobe is custom, too. "I don't do cookie cutter," she says. "Everyone loves that I give personal service and that I put it all together for them. ... I'm dealing with women who are extremely busy. They want to look good and they're doing a diversity of activities."

To schedule an appointment with an associate at The Fifth Avenue Club, call (248) 643-9025. For a "Travel Wardrobe in a Bag," call (888) 386-9688 or visit www.goinglikelynn.com. To reach Lynn Portnoy Women's Clothier, call (248) 353-2900.

Somerset Collection fashion show to benefit new charity organization

The Somerset Collection in Troy always presents their retailers' fashions in great style.

On March 26, the Somerset Collection will present the latest in spring and summer fashions and help people with special needs, too. Their Spring Fashion Ball will benefit the Iris Alliance, a newly formed consortium made up of four well-known local charities that help children and adults with developmental disabilities: On My Own of Michigan, SCAMP, F&R and Phoenix Rising.

The fashion event is a preview of new spring and summer styles that will be featured in stores throughout the Somerset Collection this season.

The event includes a strolling dinner presented by Capital Grill at 6:30 p.m. The runway show, which features eight models from the four benefiting charity organizations, follows.

After the show, guests can enjoy the sounds of and dancing to Simone Vitale.

All proceeds from the event benefit the four charities of the Iris Alliance and help children and adults with developmental disabilities have fun, full, creative and independent lives.

On My Own of Michigan is a private non-profit agency in Troy that aims to help teenagers and adults with mild developmental disabilities become social, independent and contributing members of the community. SCAMP is a day camp for special education students in Oakland County. F&R provides friends, arts and recreation for people with developmental disabilities. Phoenix Rising helps people autism and their families.

General admission tickets cost \$150 and patron tickets are priced at \$250 and both can be purchased through On My Own of Michigan, a private non-profit agency in Troy.

For ticket information, contact Deborah Korzon at (248) 649-3739.

Retail, style and special store events are listed in this calendar. Please send information to: Malls & Mainstreets, c/o Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. By fax, (248) 644-1314. E-mail, nstafford@oe.homecomm.net. Deadline for publication is two weeks in advance.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25

MALL BOOK DRIVE

Oakland Mall in Troy collects books to donate to the Detroit Public Library and other Detroit metropolitan educational resources. For each book donation, the mall will make a cash donation to the donor's school of choice. Event runs through March 31.

Donations will be accepted at mall's information desk on the lower level. For more information, call (248) 585-6000. For more information, call (734) 455-2110.

CHILDREN'S SHOW

Livonia Mall at 7 Mile and Middlebelt roads hosts "It's a Small World" with Phil Kaput and music for children, 2 p.m. For more information, call (248) 476-1160.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

FOCUS ON CASHMERE

Incorporate cashmere into your spring wardrobe at Saks Fifth Avenue's TSE Cashmere Focus Day with designer representative Debra Gringross, Designer Salon, second floor. For more information, call (248) 614-3393.

ADDED ATTRACTIONS

LILLY PULITZER STYLE

Jacobson's in downtown Birmingham hosts a Lilly Pulitzer Focus Day, 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Classic Sportswear. For details, call (248) 644-6900.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

FINANCE FOR WOMEN

Borders Books & Music in Birmingham hosts David Bach, author of *Smart Women Finish Rich* and a discussion about how women and finances, 7 p.m. For more information, call (248) 203-0005.

THURSDAY, MARCH 1

JOAN VASS TRUNK SHOW

Fibres, 270 West Maple in downtown Birmingham, presents a Spring/Summer Joan Vass Trunk Show through March 4. For store hours and other information, call (248) 723-2880.

FRIDAY, MARCH 2

TRUNK SHOW

Marguerite, 6923 Orchard Lake Road at The Boardwalk in West Bloomfield, hosts a trunk show of mother-of-the-bride and prom dresses by JOVANI through March 3, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. For details, call (248) 932-5252.

SATURDAY, MARCH 3

MAC COSMETICS EVENT

Nordstrom, the Somerset Collection in Troy, presents spring 2001 MAC cosmetics collection with personal appointments available through March 4. Cosmetics department. For information or to schedule a consultation, call (248) 816-5100.

SUNDAY, MARCH 4

RAIN FOREST FOR KIDS

Livonia Mall at 7 Mile and Middlebelt roads hosts furry and slimy animals for a children's event about the rain forest habitat, 2 p.m. For more information, call (248) 476-1160.

BRIDAL REGISTRATION EVENT

Hudson's offers morning bridal registration prior to regular store hours through March 25 at local stores. Registration is required. Twelve Oaks store, (248) 344-7070; Oakland Mall store, (248) 697-2278; Somerset Collection store, (248) 816-4721; Lakeside store, (810) 566-2940.

THURSDAY, MARCH 8

RALPH LAUREN PREVIEW

Join a merchandising editor from Vogue magazine for a preview of Lauren by Ralph Lauren's spring 2001 collection at Hudson's, Twelve Oaks in Novi, 7 p.m. For more information, call (248) 344-6800.