

Medium Is the Message: Home Shopping Hits Its Stride

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The Faraone Mennella designers prepare for their show on HSN.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

Television retail has reemerged as a hit series for accessories.

What a decade ago might have been geared more to the stay-at-home mom than the fashion insider, direct response retail channels, specifically HSN and QVC, have evolved into a hot accessories marketplace.

In the last two years, labels and designers such as Anthony Nak, Leslie Greene, Carlos Falchi and Loulou de la Falaise have launched collections on HSN and QVC. Both channels attributed the majority of their growth — on air and online — to the accessories and jewelry categories.

“Accessories has been one of our fastest-growing categories of business and continues to be so,” said HSN chief executive officer Mindy Grossman. “We know that our customer is one who feels like accessories make her outfit and continues to be very engaged. What has evolved over the past number of years as we relaunched hsn.com in 2007 is the idea of becoming an editor, to edit the program and the lifestyle, to bring great product, as well as stories and storytellers, to life.”

For accessories brands, the decision to link up to either channel is clear. With over 90 million viewers on each company’s cable station and Web site, they are impacting a broader demographic without suffering the full overhead of committing product to brick-and-mortar stores. For the majority of these brands, QVC and HSN assume a healthy percentage of manufacturing and sales costs. Accessories companies also get to connect with their audiences in a way traditional retail outlets seldom offer.

“The presentation of product really allows designers or brands to talk about the features, benefits, inspiration or details that consumers would miss in another arena,” said Karen Giberson, president of the Accessories Council and former director of accessories at QVC. “Once a consumer has the knowledge and education of a brand and the philosophy behind it, they take that appreciation and enthusiasm with them wherever they’re shopping.”

Giberson likens the one-hour time slots on the shopping channels — which most designers do six to eight times a year — to doing an in-store appearance.

The sets and shopping experience on both channels have experienced makeovers in recent years, attracting a more fashion-focused audience. Fine jewelry firm Faraone Mennella has been selling a collection of cameos on HSN for seven years and recently launched another costume line on the channel, called Luna. Co-designer Amedeo Scognamiglio said when he and co-designer Roberto Faraone Mennella debuted on HSN, he felt judged by some of his peers, including fellow designers and stylists. Now those same people are coming to him to try to join the network.

“As a veteran, I can say that the network has changed its appearance,” Scognamiglio said. “Mindy [Grossman] strived to bring quality and fashion and entertainment TV to the shopping network. It used to be all about the product and the hosts, now there’s more of an emphasis on the promos and sets. They’re built individually. It’s about being in the designer’s world.”

Scognamiglio said not once did he feel he was compromising his signature jewelry line, which retails at Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue. Instead, appearing on HSN brought him more recognition when he’d do public appearances at upscale stores that carried his line.

“Ladies at Saks or Neiman Marcus would say, ‘I’m such a big fan of your cameos.’ They’d put it together,” Scognamiglio said. “Those watching at home are not necessarily who we’d think — they’re also shopping at specialty stores.”

Doug Howe, executive vice president and chief merchandising officer for QVC, noted that direct response consumers are savvier than the channel gave them credit for years ago.

“For years we might have underestimated who our customer was or where she shops,” Howe said. “Now reams of data are showing she shops everywhere and is willing to treat herself.”

Direct response channels’ use of information, of tracking sales daily and weekly, also benefits their accessories partners. For new brands specifically, an opportunity on QVC or HSN affords them a crash

course on what type of product sells and how to better interact with customers.

“What we’re finding now is that a lot of walls have been broken down in regards to a stigma in this channel of distribution,” Howe said. “Up-and-comers look at it as a future leading model. There’s immediate feedback, which is incredibly relevant for a young designer. There’s so much you can learn from having that one-on-one exchange with a customer — and that’s our model, day in and day out.”

Satu and Celeste Greenberg, the founding sisters behind two-year-old Tuleste Market jewelry, were approached by QVC last July. They decided to partner with the channel as the brand’s philosophy centers on accessible, playful jewelry for everyone.

“We wanted to be strategic about our business, so we waited a while until we built enough press and stores,” said Celeste. “We saw this opportunity to brand our name to a wider audience. They may pick up a magazine and see our product, but they’d never put a face to it.”

Greenberg cited Target as a driving force in QVC and HSN’s reinvention among the fashion set.

“All these cool designers were doing collaborations with Target and it broke the mold,” she said. “Especially in today’s economy, it doesn’t have to be superexpensive to be fashionable.”

Fledgling luxury handbag designer Cate Adair also launched a lower-priced collection on QVC. Adair attributed the channel’s success in the last few years to a shift in the market — women are mixing the high with the low and seeking individuality. Also, today’s notion of “anonymous shopping” has consumers reaching for their remote controls instead of car keys.

“With gas prices so high, people don’t want to get in the car these days. We’re all busy and the pace of life is so frenetic, we’re desperately looking for windows to slow down. And sitting in front of the TV with a group of warm, friendly hosts, it’s kind of nice,” Adair said. “You become friends in a sense.”

Suzanne Hader, principal at 400twin, a luxury consulting agency in New York, acknowledged the benefit for these firms in partnering with direct response channels, but warned against super high-end brands delving into this distribution channel.

“When there is a rebound in the market in 18 months to two years, if certain brands want to go back to prestige, they will have to invest quite a bit of money and resources in their branding efforts to differentiate from the brands they were on HSN or QVC,” Hader said.