

The virtual wardrobe

Stylists, once the sole preserve of celebrities, now serve clients of luxury brands and high-end department stores. But what happens when private appointments are off the table?

By MILANDA ROUT

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9 MINUTE READ • 

There was a time when personal stylists were reserved for Hollywood celebrities and the red carpet. These fashion experts would gather breathtaking gowns from top designers for their stars to choose from, and such a glamorous experience was something the rest of us could only dream about (and cast judgement on via best-dressed lists). But then things began to change. Top luxury brands and department stores began to engage stylists to offer a bespoke service to VIP clients and assist them to shop in private suites. And now we've entered the next age, one in which the process has gone digital and fashion stylists are armed with purchasing data, video calls and virtual reality.

This new era has been driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, its lockdowns and restrictions on travel, and the migration to shopping online. Even in cities where retail has reopened, many customers now prefer the safety – and the convenience – of the virtual world. This has meant luxury brands, Australian fashion designers, international multi-brand platforms and department stores have all had to migrate their styling and VIP experiences online. In the past few months, David Jones has launched a virtual styling service for its customers across the country (especially in Melbourne), Camilla & Marc has done the same, Harrolds is doing video calls with

clients, Gucci has introduced a virtual reality app so you can try on sneakers and Farfetch is trialling live-stream purchasing.

“When you think about what a personal stylist can do, they take all the work out of shopping for you,” says Jamie Freed, global vice-president of Farfetch’s VIP program Private Client, who leads a team of 130 personal stylists across 23 countries for the online luxury retailer. “Everyone is time poor, especially if you are a VIP customer, so the last thing you want to do is scroll through pages of search results for a little black dress. The personal stylist understands your purchase history, they know the things you like and what you are looking for, and they send recommendations directly to you and you can have it delivered the next day. I can’t think of an easier way to shop.”

Freed joined Farfetch just over three years ago with the aim of growing its VIP service and one of the first things she did was invest in more personal stylists. There were only a handful in a few major cities around the world, but Freed wanted every top-spending client to have access to one so she expanded the team to more than 130, including two who have recently started in Australia. She says it has been incredibly well received by VIP customers as it does improve the shopping experience.

“Even people who have amazing personal style and are incredible at putting together outfits still need to be pushed and shown things that maybe they wouldn’t have been shown before,” she tells WISH on the phone from London. “When that happens, it is like magic.”

Freed says the service did involve face-to face meetings with clients pre-COVID-19, either at home, in boutiques that are represented on Farfetch, or even in hotel rooms. Since the global pandemic turned the world upside down in March, Farfetch has pivoted to video-call consultations and also sped up some technological developments it was working on, including augmented reality.

“We had a client the other day sitting in her closet with her laptop saying ‘what do you think of this or this?’ and the stylist was going ‘keep that or get rid of that’. It is so incredibly easy,” she says of video consultations. “You can do a wardrobe cleanse virtually, and we will arrange those items to be picked up and sent to a partner of ours in the UK called Thrift + and you get credits to shop again at Farfetch. This is just in the UK now but we are looking to expand to other countries.”

Freed says COVID-19 fast-tracked the development of Farfetch's Virtual Try-On service – available through the Farfetch app – which lets you aim your phone camera at your foot and try on sneakers.

It is also aiming to release a similar augmented reality application, with assistance from tech partners Wannaby, for its private clients by the end of the year, this time for high jewellery and designer watches. The move was driven by the unexpectedly high demand for “investment jewellery” since the pandemic began and various swaths of the world have been in lockdown.

“We couldn't fill some of the orders we had because demand was so high, but we did have customers say ‘I really wish I could see this watch on my wrist’ or ‘I really wish I could see what those earrings look like on my ears,’” Freed explains. “So now you will be able to point the camera at your wrist and through your phone see what the watch looks like on it. That watch could be halfway around the world and you don't have to be in the boutique to try it on.”

Farfetch is not the only luxury retailer to experiment with augmented reality. Gucci has also partnered with Wannaby and released an app called Gucci Sneaker Garage that lets you try on pairs of sneakers as well as personalise them based on the first ever virtual sneaker designed by creative director Alessandro Michele. It has labelled this technology – you can try it on your own foot or see what a sneaker looks like on your digital avatar – a “new dimension” in shopping that allows users to bring their own self-expression to “post-physical and unexplored territories”.

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Back in Australia, high-end department stores David Jones and Harrolds have both used new technology through a London-based company called Proximity Insight. It enables virtual styling sessions through video calls and a tool that allows staff to curate and build a collection for a client. David Jones has always had styling suites at the CBD flagship stores and had plans to move the service online, but the pandemic accelerated the process after customers in lockdown were calling and emailing for advice.

“We now have a service where a customer can go online, and if they are already in our database we will have their profile, what they like to wear, the brands they enjoy and the purchases they have made,” says David Jones retail and operations director Aaron Faraguna. “Our stylists can work with individuals about what they are looking for, organise a video appointment completely free of charge, and interact with the customer via video or messaging, or however the customer wants to interact.”

Faraguna says the store launched the virtual styling service – video beauty and skincare consultations are also available – in August and already they’ve seen a “significant spike” in enquiries on the website. “There was demand before we launched it because customers were either calling or emailing so they could interact in-store; they were sending photos to us, so what we have done now has just enabled a more seamless experience,” he tells WISH.

Harrolds co-managing director Mary Poulakis says the luxury retailer has also used Proximity Insight technology to ensure it stays connected to its clients during the pandemic, especially in Melbourne, where lockdowns were in place for weeks (they still were in some capacity when the October issue of WISH went to press).

“It allows staff to access our database and build visual wardrobes to send to clients,” she says. “We have also introduced virtual styling, which worked well in May and June [when the Melbourne store and head office was open]. We are just trying really hard to make ourselves available, and make the staff available and accessible to customers. For us, it is about maintaining the pillars of Harrolds and what differentiates us, and that is our love of people and passion to serve our clients. That is why I get out of bed every day; it is for those human connections.”

Sydney-based fashion label Camilla and Marc launched its own online styling service called Virtually There last month in the wake of the global pandemic. It offers customers – wherever they are in the world – a chance to connect to a team of stylists located in boutiques across Australia. They can chat via instant messaging, video calls, share photos of specific pieces from their collection and offer advice on fits. “We understand that our customers lead extremely busy lives and for various reasons may not have time or space to visit a retail store,” creative director Camilla Freeman-Topper explains. “That is why we are thrilled to be providing our customers the personalised shopping experience they would receive in any one of our boutiques from the comfort of their living rooms.”

Global online luxury retailers Net-a-Porter and Matchesfashion.com have been providing styling and personal shopping for their high-spending clients for a number of years. Net-a-Porter started its client relations service back in 2000 and launched its EIP (Extremely Important People) program in 2006. According to Elizabeth von der Goltz, Net-a-Porter's global buying director, the original aim of the service was to provide a human element to the online shopping experience. Each EIP is paired with a personal shopper/stylist and the communication takes many forms, including WhatsApp and email. This meant that they were well prepared when the pandemic hit earlier in the year.

"Whether through social media or video or onsite, we have been keeping our customer up to date and engaged during this time, offering everything from at home beauty/grooming and wellness tips to pure fashion/style escapism," von der Goltz tells WISH from London.

"We have also hosted virtual masterclasses with beauty experts, nutritionists and more to ensure we are giving our most loyal customers the same access and privileges as before. I myself have also engaged in various EIP virtual events alongside fashion and jewellery designers."

Marina Lefkaritis, private shopping director for Matchesfashion.com, says it also provides its top-spending clients with a personal stylist and the service was extremely popular, especially among very busy people.

"We are saving them time; we make the product selections and send it to them in a format they find easiest," she tells WISH. "And our advice is based on what we know about their preferences, but we will sometimes challenge clients with pieces they may not consider themselves but which we know will work for them. This adds in the excitement of discovery for the client, and we often find that designers and pieces we suggest can garner the best feedback."

Lefkaritis says Matchesfashion.com was also able to easily continue conversations with clients when the lockdowns hit in March because communication lines via email, WhatsApp and video calls were already set up. What she noticed, however, as did most of the luxury retailers that WISH spoke to for this story, was a change in what their top clients were buying. Gone was event wear and in its place were requests for cashmere pieces, loungewear and athleisurewear. Homewares were popular, as were investment jewellery and watches. "It's the new normal for them to

say they don't have an occasion to wear their party pieces but they haven't stopped shopping, they've just adapted their shopping to the new environment, and our team has been more than happy to oblige," she says.

Whatever happens with COVID-19 and restrictions on retail in the future, it is clear that online styling is here to stay. "It has all been born out of necessity but we think it is something that is not going to go away when we go back to normal, whenever that will be," says Farfetch's Freed.

"All these business technologies that we have had to develop, that everyone has had to develop, they will still be part of the operating model going forward," adds Poulakis from Harrolds. "But that expectation of luxury customer service experience [whether instore or online] will be even higher. It is not about quantity, it's about quality for us.

"This [pandemic] has given us time to home in on what really matters to our clients."

MILANDA ROUT, DEPUTY EDITOR, WISH MAGAZINE

Milanda writes profiles and features on fashion, travel, food, architecture and design for The Australian's monthly luxury magazine, WISH. She has been at The Australian since 2007, having covered federal polit... [Read more](#)



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