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Designer-purse rentals let women bag a deal

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Want to carry a classic Chanel bag or the latest Louis Vuitton? If your closet is stuffed to the max or you're not ready to make an investment in a couture handbag, try borrowing one. Designer-handbag-rental sites make it easy to dress to impress without the commitment of buying - or maxing out the credit cards.

Whether you call them totes, purses, clutches or satchels, it's no secret that women love their handbags. They're more than just functional accessories; the right bag can convey unspoken messages, like how stylish or successful a woman is.

And just as "It" bags are growing ever more popular, thanks to the celebrities who are photographed carrying the latest by Prada or Marc Jacobs, these must-have accessories are becoming more and more expensive. So what's a woman to do if she doesn't want to drop \$3,000 on every handbag that strikes her fancy?

Enter the designer-handbag-rental service.

In 2004, two men inspired by watching their wives, mothers and sisters borrow handbags from one another decided to launch Bag Borrow or Steal, based on the idea that women enjoy the chance to try on a luxury item for fun. That same year, Kara Richter opened From Bags to Riches. Both companies have become known among the fashion-conscious set as outlets for renting high-end designer bags.

So how does it work? A shopper browses a site's collections and selects the purse she'd like to check out. At Bag Borrow or Steal, visitors pay a monthly membership fee of between \$5 and \$9.95.

"Borrowing" a Louis Vuitton Neverfull tote that retails for about \$665 costs an additional \$38 a week or \$113 a month. At From Bags to Riches, the same bag is available for \$140 a month, including up to \$100 worth of damage insurance and shipping. From Bags to Riches doesn't charge a membership fee but offers some perks to those who sign up for a frequent-renter plan.

For women like Bonnie McClory, a registered nurse and small-business owner in California, sites like From Bags to Riches offer the perfect opportunity to indulge an obsession with designer handbags without the commitment of buying. "My closet's already full of designer handbags, but this lets me try on some of the trendy bags that I wouldn't necessarily buy," McClory said. "I'm much more likely to buy classics that I love, like Coach. But I also love bags from Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Gucci and Burberry, and sometimes I'll rent a fun Juicy Couture bag for my youngest daughters, who are in college, so they can just try them out."

For McClory, renting bags is a fun diversion that lets her experiment with different styles. "My

daughters and I are very much bagaholics," she said. "It's the ultimate accessory - and it doesn't matter whether you're having a bad hair day or you gain any weight. You can look fabulous, and it shows that you have some style."

Patricia Hambrick, chief marketing officer of Bag Borrow or Steal, says the site has 450,000 members, most of whom are affluent, professional women who are passionate about their handbags. But the appeal of handbags reaches beyond their target demographic to women of all ages, including students.

Alyssa Christian, a 20-year-old junior at Denison University in Ohio, says that her interest in designer bags was piqued just this year - so much so that she started Bagoholics Anonymous, a Facebook group that has more than 200 members.

"I just started seeing them everywhere: on random people when I was out and about, in magazines, online," she wrote in an e-mail. "They just grew on me, and before I knew it, I was sucked into the luxe bag world."

"Renting designer handbags is a pretty amazing thing," Christian said. She joined Bag Borrow or Steal about six months ago. "Although it's by no means cheap and cost me \$34 to rent a Gucci tote for one week, it was definitely worth it - you definitely feel popular and trendy when you're carrying a bag that you wouldn't normally be able to afford." So far, she's tried on three bags - two by Coach and one by Gucci.

Christian admits that designer handbags are an addiction. "It's not good for my pocket," she said. "It's easy to get suckered in to this high-class world of luxury, in which all of our favorite celebrities belong. Sometimes carrying a \$2,000 bag makes us feel like a star, like we're famous."

If she or any other customer falls in love with a bag, the sites offer buyout programs that allow them to pay off the cost of the bag on a payment plan. Richter says that at From Bags to Riches, a fair amount of women do choose to keep their rentals.

"They'll rent for a few months to test the waters to find something they want," she said. "But a lot are just die-hards and trade constantly."

But while many women agree that renting designer purses is a great idea, there are some true handbag enthusiasts who are wary of rented bags. Robin Kassner, a beauty and fashion editor in New York City, has a wardrobe of more than 200 handbags. She giggled as she reached into the back of her red Mercedes to show off some of her favorites, including a blue vintage Hermes Kelly bag from her grandmother.

"I'm crazy about bags the way 'Sex and the City' 's Carrie Bradshaw was crazy for shoes," she said. "I wouldn't be embarrassed to use those sites if I did," she said. "I'm just a germophobe and hate the idea of not knowing who wore a bag before I did and how they treated it." But for Kassner, wearing her grandmother's vintage bags is different. "She took such immaculate care of them, they still look very new."

Bag Borrow or Steal's Hambrick said that all of the bags are carefully inspected both before and after each rental, assuring that each bag is delivered in the best shape possible. "A little wear and tear is to be expected," she said. "But our members take great care of their bags."

And the sites are careful to let their customers know that their secrets are safe with them. "I think the biggest thing with women who rent our bags is that they feel it's their own secret treasure," From Bags to Riches' Richter said. "They don't have to share - and they usually don't - unless it's a close friend." "We have a fair amount of high-profile clients," she continued. "And because of the nature of their careers - they're being watched all the time - they have to carry designer bags that look great. So they can rent without worrying about the financial dent of owning a fabulous wardrobe of bags."

But at Bag Borrow or Steal, Hambrick says, members often tell their friends to join the site. "Women know that celebrities have been borrowing from designers forever," she said.

Another benefit to renting, Hambrick pointed out, is that during the holiday season, a woman can rent

different bags for different outfits. A woman who wants a fabulous bag for a special occasion on a Friday night can have a different bag the next week.

And even though she doesn't rent handbags herself, Kassner understands the appeal. "When people see shows like `Sex and the City' or `Gossip Girl,' they want to be able to carry great bags too," she said. So without having to spend \$2,500 for a Chanel bag, they can borrow one. "It's a cheap way of getting a little piece of Hollywood."
