

FASHION & BEAUTY

Womenswear from size-inclusive label Universal Standard.
Photos: Handouts



Fitting and proper

Size-inclusive brands offer both traditional and plus sizes in a range of trendier designs

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Fashion insiders have for years hailed plus size as the next big business opportunity, yet, before 2017, only a handful of brands and designers had been willing to take the leap forward. That all changed when 11 Honoré, an online retailer offering luxury fashion in extended sizes, made its debut.

Its founder, Patrick Herning, achieved what so many had thought was impossible. He convinced a small but influential group of American designers – many of whom had never created clothes in sizes larger than a US10 – to extend their size range up to a US24.

Herning may not have realised it back then but the industry was having a watershed moment as “size inclusive” fashion, a category with the potential to overshadow the plus-size segment, started to flourish. Unlike plus size, which just offers sizes above the traditional US0 to 12 range, size-inclusive brands offer both traditional and plus sizes, allowing them to cater to a much wider range of women.

“11 Honoré set out to create parity within the category,” Herning says. “For the first time ever we worked with ‘straight’ size designers to extend their size range to be more inclusive. I think Gen Z will ultimately shift how

brands approach their sizing because they expect so much more. Size inclusivity is paramount.”

Size-inclusive fashion is having its moment. Notable brands include denim label Good American, which was co-founded by Khloe Kardashian, and direct-to-consumer brands Universal Standard and Everybody & Everyone.

Established names, from New York designer Mara Hoffman to hip label Reformation, have also jumped on the bandwagon by launching extended size ranges. Even Amazon-owned Shopbop.com quietly launched an

A look from Everybody & Everyone.



“extended sizes” category earlier this year featuring selected styles from some of its most popular brands in sizes up to a US24.

So what is it that makes size-inclusive fashion more appealing to women than plus size?

“In my experience, offerings from plus-size brands are unflattering, and the fashion side of it is just very drab,” says hotel executive and fashion lover Alice Dupont, who is a US size 16. “No matter how hard [these brands] try, it never feels trendy and cool. Size-inclusive brands give women so much more breadth and options. They seem to design with more freedom, so the selection is fashion skewed.”

Not all size-inclusive brands have been welcomed with open arms, however, with some criticised for looking only to capitalise on the trend in the short term, rather than focusing on creating well-designed clothing for a broader customer base. Some of these brands also stop short of a size US16 or 18, considered the “average” size in many countries, which has been cited as proof of their lack of commitment.

“People are doing size inclusivity in what I feel is the wrong way,” says Alexandra Waldman, co-founder of Universal Standard, a line of elevated essentials with sizes from US0 to 40, one of the largest range of sizes on the market. “Mainstream brands, which typically cater to smaller

women, see potential for a larger customer base so they pick a few things from their pre-existing collections, make a few bigger sizes and offer them online. The sad part is that this is still only a fraction of what is available to smaller-size women.

“If you are making a brand that you think should be size inclusive, you have to offer a complete range of sizes in everything you make. The decision of what a woman wants to buy should come from her, and should not be dictated by a brand who limits their sizes.”

Of course, launching a size-inclusive brand is not as easy as a “straight sized” label, to use Herning’s words. While great design is fundamental to any brand’s success, size-inclusive brands must go that extra mile to ensure that a style is as versatile and flattering for a size 0 figure as it is for a size 20. That means plenty of research and development, especially when it comes to fit.

“The biggest challenge is the fit,” Herning says. “You don’t grade up [a] size 6 pattern to size 20. Otherwise you have an amoeba-like garment that is unflattering. We learned early on to help our stable of designers with pattern development, and other fit issues. We amassed so much data for our third-party vendors that we decided to invest in our own in-house collection, which launched this summer.”

It is definitely more expensive for a brand to produce all the sizes, Veronica Chou, founder of Everybody & Everyone, says.



A tailored outfit from 11 Honoré.

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ALEXANDRA WALDMAN, CO-FOUNDER OF UNIVERSAL STANDARD

“I even have two fit models to cater to both ends of the sizing scale and we sometimes need to adjust styles just to make sure it fits across all size ranges. We have also created new sizes for our range. For example, many women fall between where the traditional sizing scale ends and where plus-size sizing starts. In some of our products we’ve harmonised size charts to fit this gap,” she says.

Existing sizing systems can also be confusing. While most traditional brands offer standardised sizing (US0 to 10/12), the sky is the limit for size-inclusive brands. As such, most, like Good American, stick with standard conventions, but these are often deemed arbitrary and can vary from brand to brand. Others, like Universal Standard, have created their own system, which can be seen as a good or bad thing.

“The number on the tag definitely influences a woman’s mindset, especially if it’s on the larger end of the scale,” Dupont says. “At the same time I would be a bit confused with a new system. Sizing can mess with your head a bit so it may be better to use a system you know and recognise.”

Despite the issues these brands may face, there is no doubt that the category will only continue to grow. In fact, the rise of these brands reflects a much bigger movement towards inclusivity that is being embraced by the industry as a whole.

“I hope that size inclusivity is the new normal rather than just the new plus size,” Waldman says. “It may have started off as a marketing play, but most of the time these [things] transform into a core segment and drive change. I do believe it is the future because there is no other way that fashion can go. You would have to be foolish to not cater to a consumer who will always be there. It does not make sense, especially in the current climate and with the economy the way it is now.”

Activewear brand taps into colour psychology

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Ryan Hoang may have had to launch his business in the middle of a pandemic, but the timing has worked in his favour.

“We’ve sold out,” says Hoang, the Vietnamese-born founder of Centric, a maker of athletic wear in Los Angeles. “Right now, we’re very low on inventory. I didn’t expect that.”

The reason for the runaway success of Centric is a pragmatic one; most Americans, still forced to quarantine, are turning to home workouts and (despite having to exercise alone) they want to look the part. Beyond that, Hoang’s brand is different from most other activewear labels because it works on what he describes as “the psychology of colour” – that wearing certain colours, especially while exercising, can boost performance.

“It’s a huge science,” Hoang says. “Light blue is great for yoga,

because it is so calming. I like to wear burgundy when I exercise; it gives me more energy.”

They were chatting at Urth Caffe, a trendy spot on Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood. Along the street, once filled with shoppers and diners, stores are closed, “for lease” signs proliferate and parking meters stand empty.

In contrast, direct-to-consumer brands such as Centric are thriving as they tap into a need among consumers for easy-to-wear pieces that make them feel good. The demand, Hoang says, is global; Centric has two stores in Vietnam – one in Hanoi, the other in Ho Chi Minh City – and ships worldwide.

Looking back, Hoang, 30, never imagined he would be heading his own fashion brand. Born in Hanoi, he arrived in the United States aged 16 on a student exchange programme, attending school in Connecticut. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he studied marketing, and made a friend who would go on to

become his business partner in Centric.

He moved to New York after graduating from university, working in marketing for companies such as Escada and Dsquared2, before moving into engineering for a legal software company. Inspired by the buff bodies he saw everywhere around him in New York, he started working out.

“I realised I was too skinny,” he said. “People are really fit in New York. I felt I needed to do something about my own body. I started lifting weights a lot, and got more motivated when I started seeing changes in my body.”

However, as much as he enjoyed his workouts, he was disheartened to see that fitness wear – including from his favourite activewear brand Lululemon – was a sea of neutral colours.

“It was boring, all those grey and black tones,” he says. “I enjoy wearing other colours, and realised there wasn’t anybody in the market touching on the points of colour.”

He quit his job to focus full time on Centric, saying he learned all he needed to know about fabrications and fit “from the library that is Google”.

Hoang says he and his business partner work around the clock to get word of their products out. He has a lean team, working with the occasional freelancer while developing new products.

The average price is US\$65, which Hoang deemed to be “premium but affordable”. Then, of course, there are the colours: Powder Pink can “inspire creativity and imagination”. Cobalt Blue is for energy and confidence, Pine Green is “invigorating”.

Over the next several months, as the US and the rest of the world (hopefully) reopens, Hoang plans to start wholesaling the line to specialty stores, and is also looking to branch out into new categories including sweatshirts, hoodies and joggers.

The pieces he designs fit into the lifestyle he has created for himself; he brought his two

younger brothers – 15 and 17 – from Vietnam to live with him.

He remains keen on fitness and nutrition, and has experimented with various diets over the years – everything from counting calories to drinking a shake of blended boiled chicken breast, a memory he now cringes at. But he finds that what works for him is intermittent fasting; he will stop eating at 11pm, and won’t have anything the next day until 1pm.

“I keep my weight steady that way,” he says. “And I don’t have to go on crazy, unrealistic diets that are not sustainable.”

Given that gyms in Los Angeles remain closed, Hoang has bought a stationary bike and downloads workouts through an app from Equinox, a luxury chain of gyms in the US. Most days, he spends 90 minutes on the bike, much of it on a SoulCycle-type workout – clad in Centric, of course.

“I love it,” he says. “It’s like dancing on a bike. I love dancing and I love cycling, so it’s a win-win for me.”



Centric founder Ryan Hoang is keen on fitness. Photo: Handout