

Snag a luxury bag on a budget

Online rental websites bring new meaning to 'bag lady'

by Brett Marlow
Assistant A&E Editor

THE ROLLING Stones sang, "You can't always get what you want." Well, they had it wrong.

With the help of a few websites, the world of online rental has expanded beyond movies and DVDs. Companies are making the often coveted and not-always-so-affordable latest designer styles of handbags available to rent for a portion of the retail price tag.

Bag Borrow or Steal, which started in 2004, is a company that lives up to its name, allowing its guests and members to buy or borrow the latest in handbags for as long as they'd like.

Fashion Week in New York wrapped up Sept. 12 and fashionistas wanting in on the latest and greatest handbags from Coach, Chanel, Gucci, Balenciaga and Fendi, among others, for this season don't have to wear out their credit card's magnetic strip.

Bag Borrow or Steal, founded by two men who watched their wives and sisters run in and out of each other's closets looking for the perfect bag, works with more than 250,000 women who have borrowed the handbags and jewelry the site offers. Registered members pay a monthly fee anywhere from \$5 to \$10, said Lynn Ridenour, senior vice president of Marketing for Bag Borrow or Steal. The site offers more than 3,000 styles of handbags to rent, ranging from less expensive rental styles like Dooney & Burke to higher end, luxury handbags from Louis Vuitton or couture. The company aims to allow women obsessed with fashion to have access to a world of luxury at an affordable cost, Ridenour said.

Members or guests must be over 18 years old and have a valid credit card. To rent a bag they can log on to bagborroworsteal.com and search through the different styles and variety of designers. Once a bag has been chosen, either for a weekly or monthly rental, the bag is then packaged in a dust cover and shipped within the country via UPS in an ordinary cardboard box.

"We're not advertising there's luxury handbags in it," Ridenour said to ensure security.

The package is then delivered to the member. Customers pay for shipping and can choose whether or not to take insurance that covers minimal wear and tear on the item, Ridenour said.

With Bag Borrow or Steal, guests don't have to worry whether their bag is a knock-off. The company carries 100 percent authentic handbags by purchasing them directly through

designers or through their authorized distributors, Ridenour said.

Bag Borrow or Steal is not alone in this endeavor. Kara Richter, founder of a similar online rental service for handbags From Bags to Riches, which started

in 2004, offers the same opportunity for women interested in the latest handbags. Ridenour said their handbags, upon return, are put through a 10-point inspection test. Both Richter and Ridenour said they have refurbishment processes in place to restore the bags to like-new if not new condition.

"One of our commitments to our members is providing them with new or like-new experiences with bags," Ridenour said. "We've found that because these are ladies that just adore handbags, they treat our bags as if they had borrowed them from a dear friend."

It's been a rare case that a bag has been stolen or returned severely damaged, both women said.

Bag Borrow or Steal reserves the right to charge the customer in full if it is beyond normal wear and tear, Ridenour said. Richter's policy is similar.

"If the bag is lost or stolen, the customer is responsible for the cost of the bag," Richter said.

From Bags to Riches offers authentic designer handbags that normally retail anywhere from \$600 to \$1,200, with its higher end bags costing around \$299.95 a month to rent. The site requires no membership fee to rent a bag. Unlike Bag Borrow or Steal, shipping and insurance are included within the rental price and are not additional fees, Richter said. Bag Borrow or Steal's highest bags usually rent for around \$235 a month, Ridenour said. Shipping to and from costs its members \$9.95 and insurance is optional.

Both companies have tracking systems in place so they know when the bag has arrived to the customer and when it is on its way

back into their hands. "There's information in [the bags] and we have ways of tracking the bags, but I can't give any details about that," Ridenour said. "UPS definitely helps, we know where the bag is at all times."

Richter said



A patent blue leather Fendi handbag, with aged brass hardware and beige contrast stitching, is one of Bag Borrow or Steal's most popular handbags to rent. The bag normally retails for \$1,750. Members can rent it for \$95 a week or \$275 a month.

Courtesy BAG BORROW OR STEAL

through DHL, she knows when the bags have reached their destination and are on their way back. Their bags are also tracked with serial numbers and dates within the bag.

As styles emerge and change, so do From



Debbie Fitzgerald shows off her Louis Vuitton bag on the Magnificent Mile. With the rise in popularity of handbags, Fitzgerald said she is not interested in renting a bag and would rather own.

Tim Hunt THE CHRONICLE

Bags to Riches and Bag Borrow or Steal's inventory, but some bags are meant to stay. Richter said in determining which bags stay available and which are "retired," she talks with trend experts and also takes into consideration how durable the product will be. Her competitor has the same philosophy.

"We look for bags that wear well and that are going to hold their style factor," Ridenour said. "We also come from a business perspective looking at bags that are going to have some lifetime to them."

Amy Salinger, a fashion consultant based in New York and Chicago, said bag borrowing or renting isn't something she would ever do but said she thinks it's a good idea for the right people.

"If you're interested in carrying a designer bag and cannot afford it, then sure, it's a great idea, but you're not really investing anything," Salinger said. "It's like [leasing a car]. If you're interested in driving around the nicest, newest model for that two year period, then go crazy. But if you want to invest in something and have a piece that lasts over the years, then you're wasting your time."

For Emily Massa, a national makeup artist at Sephora, the concept is ideal. "The most I've spent was \$450 on a Chanel bag," Massa said. "This site sounds great because I spent all that money on the bag and ended up giving it to my mom. Unless you're loaded or a trust fund baby, you can't buy a new bag each season, trends go in and out quickly."

Both companies allow its members and

guests to purchase bags if they cannot part with them and through close-out sales during the year.

Richter said Coach is very popular on her site. Fendi is another that's hot right now with Bag Borrow or Steal, Ridenour said.

For fall, however, Ridenour said to look for metallics, patent leather and shiny handbags.

Don't forget big bags.

"Big bags are always going to be in style because they're realistic. You can fit a lot in them," Salinger said.

For fall, Salinger said to expect a lot of animal skins like crocodile, ostrich and alligator in the higher end bags and patent leather in more affordable handbags.

"I think patent leather is a material people go for because it is expensive looking but doesn't necessarily cost a fortune," Salinger said.

Metallic handbags are also a staple and aren't going anywhere, Salinger said. In particular, bags ornamented with bronze colored hardware are something that fits in well with fall and people will see a lot of, she said.

To tote around one of these high end handbags visit bagborroworsteal.com, or frombagstoriches.com. For fashion consulting in Chicago visit amysalinger.net.

bmarlow@chroniclemail.com