

High-end labels on a tight budget

Author scouts out a fall wardrobe for under \$250



Debbie Weisberg, author of "The Fashion Lover's Guide to Incredible Bargains," combs through the shoe racks at Marshalls. (David L. Ryan/Globe Staff)

By [Ami Albernaz](#)

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Some people get jittery and short of breath when they have to speak publicly or visit the doctor. Newtonite Debbie Weisberg, a petite woman with carefully coiffed dark blond hair and a penchant for high-end labels, admits the right sale will throw her into a similar tizzy. The author of the new book "The Fashion Lover's Guide to Incredible Bargains," Weisberg is something of an expert at hunting down the best bargains, fine-tuning her strategies over the years about when, where, and how to shop.

"I was born with the shopping gene," says Weisberg, who co-owns a small public relations company in Needham. As it turns out, a few traits are helpful when it comes to bargain stalking: among them, patience (for comparison shopping, sifting through shelves and racks, and waiting for markdowns on coveted items); organization (for keeping track of upcoming sales); and chutzpah (for trying to strike deals on full-price merchandise). While the recession has made us smarter shoppers, scouting out

deals is a way of life for the serious bargain hunter, like working out or eating healthy.

But nothing beats seeing a veteran bargain hunter in action. So Weisberg took this reporter on a scouting trip for fall and winter wares - including a winter coat - with a budget of \$250.

First stop: Filene's Basement downtown, to look for a coat and a handbag. Weisberg, who hits the chain's Newton location once a week or more, likes the Basement for the reason most bargain shoppers do: the steady stream of high-end discounts. (When we met, Weisberg was wearing a Balenciaga jacket she'd bought at another Filene's Basement with an e-mail coupon, along with satin pants and Stuart Weitzman ankle boots, bought on clearance at Saks for more than 80 percent off the original price.)

In her book, Weisberg draws a distinction between an inexpensive find and what she considers a true bargain, which "is all about quality, famous maker brands, or designer names," and which will likely stay in your wardrobe for a long time.

"It's great to find brand-name merchandise on sale," she said. "Those are pieces that will last. The Targets and H&Ms are good for trendy pieces, pieces that are fun to update your wardrobe with."

She made quick work of the coats, deciding on a black and white Mac & Jac short coat with three-quarter sleeves and black trim. The jacket was \$59.99, with a "Compare at \$159" tag.

"The 'Compare at' prices are generally very accurate," Weisberg said, a conclusion drawn from years of comparison shopping and perusing magazines. "I think sometimes they even make it less [than what an item could sell for], because otherwise, people might not believe it."

Next, she considered an elegant, black all-cashmere sweater for \$49.99. If she were shopping for real, she said, she would wait for a coupon to buy it. (Filene's Basement frequently sends out coupons to people on its mailing list.) She deemed the sweater a strong possibility. As we weaved through the racks, she spotted Paper Denim & Cloth jeans for \$49.99 that would make a good fall staple.

In the handbag section, she picked up a jeweled faux alligator purse - "like Judith Leiber," she said - but at \$79.99, costing much less. Mindful of the total budget, though, Weisberg settled on a dark red faux crocodile clutch for \$19.99 instead.

The steepest markdowns of the year are usually found in January and July, at the end of stores' major seasons. Becoming friendly with associates at favorite stores can help you keep track of upcoming sales, Weisberg said. They might tip you off as to when items will be marked down, or even set a coveted piece aside.

Off-price chains like Filene's Basement, Marshalls, and T.J. Maxx can provide bargain hunters with a steadier fix, particularly those shoppers who visit frequently.

"[Off-price stores] get thousands of items in every week," Weisberg said. In the past, she added, some of the merchandise had imperfections, but nowadays, most of it is first-quality, and is a mix of past season and current items.

Next on the shopping list was boots. Weisberg led us across Boylston Street to Marshalls. She came up empty in the clearance section, where she headed first, but found nearby an attractive pair of stretchy over-the-knee Nine West boots for \$49.99. Surveying the shelves some more, she admired another pair of over-the-knee boots, soft, chocolate brown ones by Escada for \$299.99 (with a particularly lofty "compare at" price, \$1,790). Though these were more elegant than the Nine West pair, the similarity in style helped convince her that the former, for the price, was a good choice for adding to the tally.

With the core pieces out of the way, it was time to look for a few trendy pieces to add some spice. So off to H&M we went. On the first floor, Weisberg looked over a rack of sweater dresses in gray, red, and black for \$24.95 that could be paired with a wide belt and serve as an alternative to the cashmere sweater on our list. She chose a wide black belt for \$17.95 among the accessories on the second floor, and picked out a pair of animal-print tights (\$7.95) and a chunky, black and silver bracelet (\$6.95).

The grand total for the coat, cashmere sweater, jeans, clutch, boots, tights, and bracelet was \$244.85. Substituting the H&M sweater dress and belt for the cashmere sweater, the total was \$237.76 - more than enough to throw in a pair of knit gloves and tam that went for \$6 each at H&M.

Like any seasoned shopper, Weisberg doesn't confine her searches to brick-and-mortar stores. Her favorite websites include Posh Vintage (www.poshvintage.com), which features well-known vintage designers and sometimes has 10 or 20 percent off sales, and TheOutnet (www.theoutnet.com), the outlet site of the online luxury fashion store Net-A-Porter. To prune her closet and earn a little extra money, Weisberg also sells clothes and accessories she no longer wears on eBay - a habit that her sons, now 19 and 22, started her on.

The dismal economy has scared a lot of people off from shopping, Weisberg conceded, though people are slowly making their way back. Still, she believes the caution many have adopted during the recession will remain intact even after the economy rebounds.

“I don’t think people will shop with the abandon they once did,” she said. “But not to shop at all . . . that’s no fun.”■

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