Net-a-Porter's Natalie Massenet, still the rebel of retail

The pioneer of luxury online is now redefining the runway-to-rack cycle.

By Booth Moore, Times Fashion Critic
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LONDON -- EVEN in gray London, L.A. native Natalie Massenet has managed to carve out a bit of sunlight for her Net-a-Porter .com offices -- tweaking them under the striking glass dome of Whiteley's shopping center. There is something poetic about this online fashion queen having her offices in a bricks-and-mortar retail relic named after William Whiteley, who opened one of London's first department stores here in 1863.

He was as much a visionary in his day as Massenet is in hers. The former fashion editor has been challenging the rules of retail since she launched her website in June 2000, starting with convincing fashion brands that the Internet was about more than discounting, and that $1,500 handbags really would sell online.

Massenet did this and more, bringing 200 brands to her online store, alongside top 10 lists and runway reports with an editorial point of view. She distinguished her site from then-competitors Boo.com and ShoppingTheWorld by focusing on packaging and customer service, with same-day delivery available in London and New York.

Beyond creating just one impressive site, she reinvented the way we shop. Massenet paved the way for luxury online, and now all designers have e-tail sites, including Marni, Yves Saint Laurent and Stella McCartney.

Following her lead, department store sites evolved into mini-magazines with trend reports and blog posts. She also proved to shoppers that buying clothing online could be easy.

At Net-a-Porter, each garment has notes about size and fit, including exact measurements of sleeve and hem lengths, a practice other stores are replicating.
Now, Massenet is on the cusp of the next retail leap: collapsing the six-month runway-to-rack cycle to just hours.

"Natalie is the one who officially made Web shopping chic," says handbag designer Anya Hindmarch, an early recruit to the site. "She succeeded where others didn't see it through. She buys with utter conviction, knows her customer and is a savvy marketer."

Although Massenet is a front-row fixture at the runway shows, she's less a fashion creature of the editor-in-chief variety than she is a businesswoman. She is quiet, firm and generally dresses in more conservative pieces. But they are the most chic conservative pieces you've ever seen.

Net-a-Porter was started with $1 million, and after eight years, business is booming. In 2006, the site had revenues of $73.9 million. Los Angeles is the second biggest market in the U.S. because it's "paparazzi-free shopping," Massenet says, and it has some of the largest single orders, including one for $40,000.

Now that the Internet has come of age, runway photos travel around the world at lightning speed, and copies of garments land in stores before the designer originals. So, earlier this year, Massenet shortened the time it takes for a dress to travel from the runway to your closet from six months to 48 hours, when she struck a deal with Halston to sell two looks from the fall collection the day after the show on Net-a-Porter. Although she won't say how much inventory there was, it sold out in 45 minutes.

Smarter shoppers

"THE fashion cycle is outdated," Massenet says, dressed in a sparkly, black Burberry Prorsum skirt, and sipping tea near the bank of computers that is sending luxury out to 150 countries.

"In the last five years, the consumer is more educated than ever. She gets to see the runway shows at the same time as the buyers and the editors, yet we are still treating her as if she hasn't seen them — telling her what's happened and making her wait six months to buy it in the stores. We're telling her it's all about pointy-toed shoes next season, when what's in the stores now is round-toed shoes.

"You can't tell the customer that it's about two different things. She'll skip the round toe and go straight to the pointy toe, because that's what's coming next."

Massenet grew up in the Ladera Heights neighborhood of L.A. Her parents were divorced, and she spent most of her time with her dad, a PR man. She remembers carpooling to her job at the Beverly Center with pal Lenny Kravitz, who was working retail before he conquered the music biz. In the summers, she traveled to France to see her mother, a house model for Chanel.

After graduating from UCLA in 1987, Massenet landed in the film business, working as a production assistant on "Warm Summer Rain" and other forgettable titles. Then she got a call from Yul Brenner's daughter Victoria, who was starting a bureau for the Italian fashion magazine Moda, and wanted Massenet to help.

She styled Milla Jovovich and Kim Basinger for shoots before being hired in the West Coast office of Women's Wear Daily in 1993. Massenet was well on her way to the masthead when she met future husband Arnaud Massenet, an investment banker, during a summer jaunt to Notting Hill Carnival in London.

A few months later, she moved to London with 30 boxes and no job. It wasn't long before Tatler magazine took her on. By the time she left, she was senior fashion editor. Then she started working as a freelance stylist for the late Isabella Blow.

One morning, Massenet announced to the British style icon that she wanted to do a late 19th century-themed fashion shoot. And, in that quixotic way fashion editors talk, when something makes sense only 17 steps later, Blow responded, "Of course! Porcelain."

Massenet had no idea what Blow meant, so her husband offered her a laptop. She typed in "porcelain," "late 19th century," "British" and other search words, and figured out that Blow was referring to the fantastical designs on British Arts and Crafts-era ceramics. That led to further exploration.

"From the moment I logged on and found out about fashion, I got sucked in," she says.

Fashion magazines were reporting on online shopping, Massenet remembers, but it was always about a mom-and-pop store selling a vintage sweater, or the Gap. She recommended to a friend who was importing pashminas from India that she try selling them online.
The friend wasn't interested, but Massenet was. She began to plan a site. After hitting “prêt-à-porter” in her fashion dictionary, she came up with “net-a-porter.” It was that name, a twist on the French term for ready-to-wear, that made her think bigger than pashminas, about bringing designer brands online.

Jimmy Choo and Anya Hindmarch were among the 35 brands to sign on. Net-a-Porter was launched June 10, 2000. "From Day 1, every week our sales were doubling," Massenet says.

She got lots of advice from her husband, who runs a hedge-fund business and is now a Net-a-Porter director. And by 2002, she had picked up the hottest names in fashion, including Chloe, Marc Jacobs, Narciso Rodriguez and Michael Kors.

**Runway ordering**

THE Halston deal was an extension of a project she did with Roland Mouret last July. Massenet broadcasted the designer's show online and allowed shoppers to pre-order looks straight from the runway. "We had a shoe Louboutin did for Roland that only existed as a prototype," Massenet says, "but we started selling it immediately. And the knockoffs -- different stores started selling versions of the shoe we had just put up on the site. The whole cycle of a designer creating something, and being ripped off, happened in a matter of days."

The clothes didn't arrive until four months later, so with Halston, Massenet vowed to have inventory waiting in the warehouse. "It was only two looks, but it was planting a flag," she says.

Now she's looking for more ways to transcend artificial seasons and bridge the gap between designer and audience, which means changing the way fashion does business.

"The thing that has to change is that buyers have to place their orders before the runway shows," she says. Then the runway shows happen, the public attends and clothes arrive in stores a month later. "It wouldn't change the fact that we would be talking about the color gray. The buyers are still going to buy how they would. But customers will see and get excited about a product when it hits stores."

If the future happens as Massenet predicts, then shopping will have come full circle. Instead of being a globally homogenized pursuit, it will be a personal one, harking back to the time when clients had personal relationships with designers, ordering looks after seeing them presented in a small atelier.

Except now, that atelier will be online.

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