

Shopping from the mouse to the house

It is hard to make your home a haven when you're tied to your desk all day, but online help is at hand for working women, says **Kasia Maciejowska**

Ladies who never lunch are the new target market for online homeware retailers. Working women who are chronically short of time, and who eat sushi or an Innocent Veg Pot at their desks at lunchtime, have fuelled the growth of online clothing stores, such as Asos.com and Net-a-Porter.com.

Now new sites, such as Achica.com, have been launched to let these customers shop for their homes in the same way that they shop for fashion. Achica is owned by Quentin Griffiths, the cofounder of Asos, and Will Cooper, the former boss of the digital marketing company TradeDoubler.

Achica aims to apply the online fashion club model to interior decoration. Clubs such as Cocola and Fashion Confidential are, says Griffiths, the future of online shopping, as they pander to the desire to be

in the know before anyone else. "It's about the impulse buy," he says. "Achica drops an image of some nice candlesticks into your inbox and you see the discount from the original price and just click and buy."

Achica's strategy is to offer discounts. Mydeco.com, which is attracting one million searches a month, has another weapon — the 3-D image maker. This allows you to see how furniture would look in your home before you buy.

Women have become highly confident in how to express their style through clothes, but with interiors they are less sure. "You get dressed everyday," says Nicole Vanderbilt, the chief executive of Mydeco.com, "but buying furniture happens infrequently. These are big purchases and people are less literate in interior style, which is why they always seek advice, particularly on taste."

Vanderbilt has observed a change in

customer confidence. Previously, the top ten stores cited by Mydeco customers were mainstream brands; the site sells homeware from leading high street names such as Debenhams, Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer. Recently there has been a shift to boutiques and independent labels, which suggests that customers trust Mydeco's ability to filter products. Juliettes Interiors (juliettesinteriors.co.uk) is one of these lesser-known labels.

Bouf.com, another interiors shopping site that was launched in 2007, also strives to connect shoppers with homeware brands that are not household names. Bouf's Alex Griffin says that he sought to bridge the gap between consumers and designer-manufacturers that had emerged to compete against the mass-produced brands on the high street. The site now has 3,500 visitors a day, which is a fivefold increase on this time last



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year. It is becoming recognised as a resource for fun, non-traditional pieces; one of its bestsellers is an egg-shaped recycling bin reminiscent of a Sixties space age fantasy. The way that Griffin explains his site sums up what these companies offer: “We organise a fragmented group of micro-manufacturers into a manageable space. We bring quality control into the mix, we introduce a single checkout and customer support team.”

Similarly, The House Directory (thehousedirectory.com) was set up in 2001 to offer “a helping hand in a bewildering marketplace”, as Nicolette Le Pelley, the company’s co-founder, puts it. The directory — the homeware sector’s answer to financial products comparison sites — now receives more than 500,000 hits a month.

“Sites like ours are not about voyeurism, they are about turning aspiration into reality,” says Le Pelley. At her desk, the lady who never lunches may dream of one day eating her lunch off a plate, but at least she can realise her image of her dream home.

The futuristic
£120 Ovetto
recycling bin is
a Bouf bestseller



Mydeco now features products from boutique brands, such as this Sophia range from Juliettes Interiors



CORBIS





The Achica website offers items such as this Saccaro outdoor furniture for customers with no time to shop

