

ONLINE

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Boutiques website is like having your own personal shopper

Google's new shopping site learns about your tastes, preferences and budget – to create customized fashion suggestions

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I write about technology, not fashion, and I'm afraid it shows.

My closet is full of my fashion faux pas, items that looked great on the rack or online on gorgeous models but somehow failed to transform my mostly jeans and hand-me-down image into anything more elegant.

And so, of course, I had to sign up for Google's new Boutiques.com, a shopping site that's

a little like having your own personal shopper who knows everything about you — from your loathing of all things paisley to your penchant for pointy-toed shoes. It also incorporates social networking, letting you follow your favourite designers, celebrities, bloggers or others whose style you admire.

I worked my way through setting up a profile, created my own boutique and found both pluses and minuses.

What I liked about it:

- It has extensive lists of styles

and designers, but even non-fashionistas who think Laundry is something you do on wash days can cobble together their preferences by simply clicking on the pictures they like best.

- If you're a bargain hunter, the site makes it easy by letting you narrow your searches to "sale only" and "free shipping." If you'd never be caught in anything less than a luxury brand, there's a button for that as well. But don't limit your looking to the sales list. I found a Michael Kors shirt that I liked at \$510

and when I clicked on the shirt, I ended up at Bluefly, which had three left at \$193.59.

- Boutiques.com learns your preferences as you go along, letting you love/hate items with a list of reasons — from price to colour to silhouette.

If you are a bit slapdash in listing your preferences in the first place, as I was, it gives you a chance to fine-tune them later. So when the fluorescent pink Spandex pants showed up in my boutique of recommended items (because I hadn't narrowed

down colour choices in the pants section of preferences) I was able to eliminate them from future consideration.

What I didn't like:

- The settings default to making your profile public. You can hide your profile from public search, but you have to click on that, otherwise it's open. I'd like the option of a smaller network, say friends and family members who share your shopping sprees and can be relied on to be tactful when they tell you that dress makes

you look the size of Chicago.

- In Canada we're still pretty much second-class online shopping citizens, a factor that is brought home when you finally find that perfect dress, only to be told "You are not allowed to see this item," when you click through to the retail website.

Overall, I'd say Google has scored with this one, delivering a useful and customized service that's almost as good as having your own personal shopper.

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