

30 August 2011

Retail Industry Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

Dear Commissioners

The Australian Retail Industry

I would like to comment as a (would-be) consumer with regard to our clothing and shoe retailers. So often after visiting a whole range of stores I come away frustrated at not finding an item which seems to me very basic. I wonder how many other shoppers have the same experience. Surely some of these stores could improve their performance simply by catering for a much wider range of ages, statures, figure types and tastes. This would make deregulated shopping hours and penalty rates for staff more worthwhile for them.

My own weekend shopping expeditions are often not worth the effort. If I do find an item of clothing in a style and colour which I like, very often none are left in my size due to stores stocking so few in smaller sizes. This includes shoes, lingerie and hosiery. Why do stores do this? I've come to expect that "Sale" means "we've overstocked on larger sizes and there's nothing at all of interest left in your size even if you are willing to pay full price".

Apart from the sizing issue, I find department stores give far too much emphasis and floorspace to the latest (often quite novel) trends for slim young people of above average height. These fashions do not suit or even appeal to many of us for a variety of reasons. Not all women want low necklines, loose shapeless tops, the crushed or grunge look, hipster trousers, or a choice between six inch heels or none.

Ladies who take larger sizes may be catered for by some stores in terms of alternative designs, however as a size 10 to 12 of short stature, I have a lot of difficulty finding clothes which I like. I am aware that our two leading department stores have Petite sections for women 5'4" or under. Most ladies who browse here are somewhat shorter than this. The store advertises that we can wear the same fashions as others -- the same styles, just made proportionally shorter. This sounds good, however too often exactly what I DON'T want. I want designs which actually suit a shorter figure. In my experience this means more tailored styles and definitely doesn't include

those gathered (or tucked in) around the waist or hips or with horizontal stripes --yet again this week I found these sections full of items like this.

Other clothes are impractical, for example blouses which would otherwise be suitable for the office with too many fiddly buttons, in poor quality crushable fabric or with wide sleeves unsuitable for wearing under a jacket. Designers and buyers should think about how items of clothing will combine when worn by real people wanting to dress comfortably for a range of temperatures during the day, not by mannequins in a store display.

And with my sensitive skin, *please* don't expect me to dress in latex, especially in summer!

One section of the community completely forgotten by retailers are the very small more mature adults, including many of the elderly. My problems are nothing compared with the difficulties of clothing my mother who requires dress size 6. Surely the department stores could do better and treat these people with more respect than pointing them to the young teen's section, and I could put away my sewing machine.

Of course men also have problems with sizing. My husband has trouble buying business shirts to fit him properly as he takes a shorter sleeve length. He relies on one brand and finds the stores which stock this brand are usually not even willing to assist by ordering in. Buying on-line is looking very good here.

I do appreciate that some chains and labels consciously pursue the image of appealing to the fashionable young. A couple of others do try to cater for an older age group who still want to look fashionable. However the latter, and certainly department stores, could do better by providing a much greater range of sizes and styles. For example, there is a whole generation of quite elderly ladies who, like my mother, want more conservative feminine styles with higher necklines and at least elbow length sleeves.

If retailers adjusted their buying patterns to cater for the whole community they might discover a lot of pent-up demand. I hope the inquiry leads some clothing retailers to reconsider their approach and shopping becomes less depressing for many of us.

Yours faithfully,

ANN HAWKINS