



**JULIUS PEPPERS**  
FEELS FREE TO BE  
THE LEADER THIS  
YEAR. SPORTS

PHILLIES OPEN  
WORLD SERIES  
WITH A WIN  
Sports

**Trendy at any price**  
Go big and bold  
with jewelry this  
fall. *Style*



# The Charlotte Observer

## If you get an invite, hit that online sample sale

The first few times I got e-mail invitations to members-only sample sales, I deleted without opening. Discount designer goods at a fraction of the retail price? For some reason, I was channeling my Internet-skeptic relatives. It sounded a little too good to be true.

But, when chatty invites from sites such as ruelala.com and gilt.com didn't let up, the bargain shopper (and label lover) in me couldn't resist. Zac Posen, Thakoon and Marc Jacobs at

IF THE SHOE FITS



**RACHEL SUTHERLAND**

70 percent off? It wouldn't hurt for me to create an account and take a quick peek, right?

Wrong. So very, very wrong. But so good.

It's the latest twist on bargain shopping in the digital age. Gone are the days of getting physical or name-calling over the last Michael Kors dress on a crowded sales floor. Now, there's no need for fisticuffs if you've got a quick mouse finger and a credit card.

Online sample sales are genius in their simplicity. Gilt Groupe is the

brainchild of Alexis Maybank and Alexandra Wilkis Wilson, who combined their collective experience as executives with eBay and Bulgari to launch the site in 2007.

They told Women's Wear Daily that less than 1 percent of U.S. residents have access to brick-and-mortar sample sales (traditionally held in New York City, sometimes Los Angeles). Buzz for their site has been building, in part from positive mentions in InStyle, The Wall Street Journal, Lucky and on the Today show.

The member-referral requirement keeps the air of exclusivity while still widening the shopper pool. Once you're in, there's motivation to spread the secret: Some offer credit for turning others on to the site. When your friends buy, you can get up to \$25 toward your own purchase.

If you haven't received an invite to a

specific site, we've got the hookup. We won't get the referral credits (violation of our ethics policy), but you'll get to shop. For access to Gilt Groupe, visit [www.gilt.com/charlotteobserver](http://www.gilt.com/charlotteobserver). For Ruelala, head to [www.ruelala.com](http://www.ruelala.com), click on "Invited by a Member" and enter [VIP@ruelala.com](mailto:VIP@ruelala.com) as the referral e-mail address.

The popularity of sample sites is spreading, with varying levels of designer and member exclusivity. Over the past few weeks, e-mails touting startups such as [ishopfem.com](http://ishopfem.com) and [thesavvy.com](http://thesavvy.com) have flitted across my screen, each touting a bevy of notable names such as Max Mara, Rebecca Taylor and L.A.M.B.

Downside to online shopping: you can't physically inspect the items.

I learned my lesson the hard way with a pair of Charlotte Ronson platform spectators. They were not leath-

er (as advertised) and I'm confident had I seen them in person, I would have never purchased.

Adding insult to my easily-excitable-shopping injury, I didn't read the return policy carefully and missed the window (it can be as short as 14 days).

And, as far as sample sales go, clothing tends to stay in the smaller sizes - you often won't find much larger than a 10-12, if that.

While my first shopping foray wasn't as fruitful as I had expected, one of my girlfriends has had quite a bit of success. Her haul (so far) includes children's clothing, a Bagley Mischka dress and a Kooba bag.

She says her husband isn't too happy with me. Clearly, she didn't tell him about the cash-for-referrals program.

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