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## What Size Are You, Really? The Truth Behind Vanity Sizing

YB By YouBeauty.com | Fashion – Thu, Aug 25, 2011 2:26 PM EDT

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Like most new moms, Erin Correale wants to whip her wardrobe back into shape.

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"I wear a size two in Ann Taylor, a four in Banana Republic, a six in Old Navy, a four at Coldwater Creek and a friend told me about Chico's, but told me I would have to look at a size zero," she says. "I never like size zero-it's encouraging people to be waifs. That doesn't make me feel good."

Sizes zero, two, four and six all for one woman? Is Correale lost in the looking glass, growing and shrinking at every turn like Alice, or is there something seriously askew with the sizing of clothing?

QUIZ: What's Your Body Type and Body Shape

It's no mistake. The American apparel industry has created an intentional system of "Vanity Sizing." The increasing use of the smaller sizes-a size 12 in 1970 is now in the size four-six-eight range-is meant to make consumers feel better about buying clothing.

Standards-or Lack Thereof

When it comes to sizing, there are no universal standards. A woman with a traditional hourglass figure with 36-24-36 measurements can wear anything from a size zero to a size ten, depending on the brand and whether it's sold at the designer, contemporary, junior, bridge or mass level.

The only standard that does exist is to con the buyer into believing she's smaller. Over time, sizes are getting roomier, allowing women to believe they can still squeeze into a more desirable size two, four, six or even eight.

"At this point, sizes are meaningless. They're more relative than anything else," Bill Ivers, chief operating officer of MSA Models told YouBeauty. His agency specializes in providing fit models for designers and brands.

"Sizes are not standard by design," he explained. "It helps brands be unique and offer an edge over the competition. Brands are looking for brand loyalty and if last season you were an eight and this season you're a size six, that's a sales tool. We all look to apparel to make us look good, feel comfortable and confident."

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Even celebrities fall victim to the need for vanity sizing.

One actress cold-called Robert Verdi, style director at FirstComesFashion.com and a celebrity stylist who regularly works with stars like Eva Longoria and Kathy Griffin, and asked him to wardrobe her for multiple appearances during an awards season.

Her publicist said the actress was a size 12, and because they were working on a quick turnaround of less than three weeks, Verdi couldn't ask designers to make anything custom, so had to rely on pieces designers had in stock.

"We looked at pictures of this woman and I called her publicist back and asked her, is she really a size 12?" he told YouBeauty. "The publicist insisted she was a 12."

When Verdi and his team packed the dresses up for the trip to Los Angeles, "we snuck in some 14s, 16s and even some 18s."

Though Verdi told the actress that everything was a "size 12," the actress "wasn't happy," he said. She ultimately wore several of his picks, but one of the dresses was altered to fit by making it six-to-eight inches shorter. The fabric was then added as a panel on the back of the dress so the "size 12" would fit.

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"She didn't want to be bigger than that in her head. A number means so much to so many people," he added. That's really too bad since the numbers are pretty much meaningless and there are no standards in place.

This lack of sizing standards wasn't always the case.

Until January 20, 1983, the U.S. Department of Commerce and the National Institute of Standards and Technology offered specifics for the sizing of apparel with body measurements for men, women, junior women, young men and children. These standards began in the late 1940s as a byproduct of the necessity for size-standardization in military uniforms during World War Two. Committees that included textile manufacturers, designers and retailers worked with the Department of Agriculture to determine these sizing standards and all adhered to it.

The program was discontinued in 1983. The measurements were not keeping up with the typical American body, which was changing due to better medicine and nutrition, along with an influx of new and varied ethnic groups. Sponsorship of these standards was assumed by private industry. That marked the start of sizing's new Wild West, a lawless, volatile environment that continues today.

### An End in Sight?

"Each designer has their own vision of what they imagine as the ideal person to wear their clothing," explained Tanya Shaw to YouBeauty. "Designers will hold true to what they believe."

Shaw is the founder and president of MyBestFit, a sizing system that scans your body for about 10 seconds and then provides you with sizing recommendations for styles from over 30 brands like the Gap, Old Navy, Talbots and J Brand.

MORE: Our reporter tries out MyBestFit

"We help customers decode sizing and that makes shopping as simple as uniformity," she explained. "We should find clothes that fit our bodies, not sizes we like to hear."

The company currently operates one scanner at the King of Prussia Mall in the suburbs of Philadelphia, PA, but will be adding 45 more locations in fall 2011. Though a Personal Shopping Guide from MyBestFit in King of Prussia will only provide resources that are in that mall, you can enter your identifying code on the company's web site to find what other sizes and brands will fit you when shopping at another location or online.

"When you cut the confusion out, consumers buy more," Shaw said. "They have told us the conversion rate [from shopper to buyer] of 100 customers is normally 20 percent. With MyBestFit, in some cases, it's as high as 90 percent. Imagine if you went into a fitting room and it all fit-your shopping time is more productive."

Cricket Lee is taking it a step further and attempting to get standards back into the lexicon of apparel makers and designers. She founded Fitlogic, a patented sizing system that fits by body type and size. Though it is now accepting pre-orders online for fall shipments, Lee has spent five years struggling to bring it to market. Because each brand has its own sizing, designers and apparel manufacturers weren't interested.

Her labeling categorizes women in three shape groups-circle, hourglass and triangle-and the Fitlogic label carries the traditional size plus a number for one of these categories.

MORE: Dress for Your Body Shape

"The truth will set you free and if you know you're a size four and shape three, you know a size 4.3 in FitLogic will fit you every time," Lee explained. "Women don't have the time to mess with trying on sizes. It is debilitating to walk into a fitting room with 10 pairs of pants and have nothing fit."

"It's progress and it will happen," she added. "If this can reduce return by 75 percent, how can designers and retailers ignore it?"

MSA Models' Ivers is skeptical that day will come. "There is no universal fit and I doubt that there ever will be. If five people take measurements of the same person, there will be five different measurements," he said. "Consumers have to learn to adapt to the fact that today you're a size zero and tomorrow, you're a four."

While new mom Correale admits she "loved being a size two at Ann Taylor, I didn't really believe it." Shopping certainly isn't any easier. "I don't know how to shop other than taking three sizes into the fitting room or having someone run back and forth for me. It never works."

Shopping woes aside, maybe Lee is correct and the truth will set you free. If knowing that a number on a tag is meaningless will free you from getting hung up on sizes and allow you to focus on the best fit for you, maybe it's not such a bad thing after all.

- Lisa Marsh

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