

BUSINESS / RETAIL

# Cuyana's Radical Retail Concept: Fewer, Better Items

Retailer takes its time whether it's designing a blouse or evaluating retail sites.

By [Sharon Edelson](#) on June 6, 2018



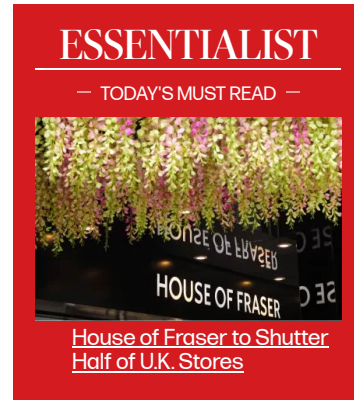
Cuyana's new SoHo store.

You've heard of the slow food movement, which advocates a healthier alternative to fast food by focusing on quality, authenticity and sustainability. Cuyana, an e-commerce retailer, that recently opened its first Manhattan store, promotes a lean closet program, which suggests consumers buy fewer, better products.

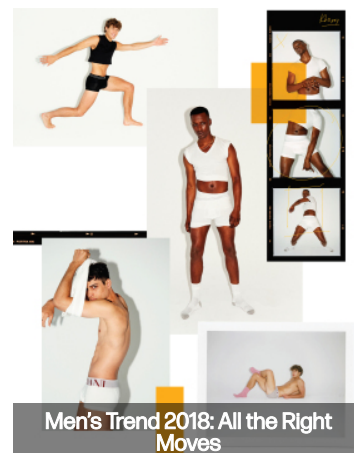
Cuyana's 1,800-square-foot store at 29 Prince Street in SoHo, follows its own advice with spare fluid pieces of peach-hued furniture such as a curved bench and oval display case, peach walls and racks of clothes on thick hangers with lots of deliberate empty space between garments. The brand has been preaching the wisdom of less-is-more for years.

In 2013, Cuyana launched the lean closet movement when the collection was introduced. The movement has a do-good appeal. "Our lean closet movement challenges us to collect fewer, better things and to donate the pieces in our wardrobes that are merely taking up space to those who need them," according to the Cuyana web site.

The reward for buying fewer items is quality materials and fine craftsmanship, Cuyana said. The brand claims to work with small, family-owned businesses, which are some of the same



## LATEST GALLERIES



artisans that are used by “some of the world’s most respected couture ateliers.”

“We’re not one of the brands that’s been anti-retail,” said Shilpa Shah, who cofounded the company with Karla Gallardo. “We wanted to take our time to do it right. We did four years of pop-ups in eight cities. We had a year for documenting our customers’ journeys.”

Shah said Cuyana is thoughtful about investment decisions, testing pop-up shops in three different neighborhoods of a city and opening in the place it knows will be successful. “Our stores are profitable in the first two months outside of the CapX we spend,” she said, of the company which has been venture capital-backed since 2012. “We’re opening more stores and we’re on our way to profitability,” Shah said, adding that new units could bow anywhere Cuyana has done pop-ups or tests, including Dallas; Chicago; Boston; San Francisco; Washington, D.C.; Seattle, and Portland, Ore. An atelier in San Francisco functions as a showroom, and there’s an existing store in Los Angeles.

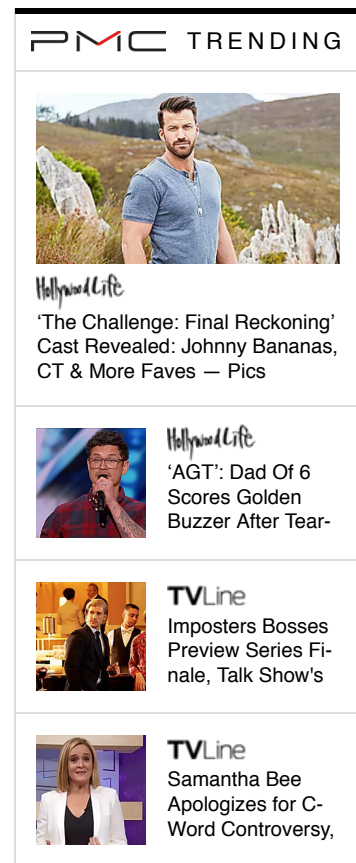
“How can we be a fashion e-commerce brand with this philosophy, when fashion, by it’s nature has to have trend relevancy,” Shah said. “We really believe in fashion. Our brand has never been about minimalism. It’s about shopping with intention.”

With so many labels available in stores and online, consumers can get an instant high from a purchase, Shah said. But that may be followed by buyer’s remorse when they later learn the product isn’t the quality they were expecting, which curtails the longevity of the purchase, Shah said.

“We, as Americans, are flush with choices, yet very few of those choices fulfill what’s promised,” Shah said. “Either the items weren’t lasting or they had an unattainable price. Almost everything we launch becomes a bestseller. Our repeat rates are through the roof.

“Our designs are timeless, so they’ll last,” Shah said, adding that Cuyana supports artisans from around the world and sells poplin dresses from Turkey; reversible knit coats, Scotland; silk scarves, Italy, and Toquilla straw hats, Ecuador. Couture-quality heavy silk is sourced in New York and pebbled leather in Los Angeles. Handbags use leather from Italy and Turkey.

Cuyana’s goal is to design the few key silhouettes that will find their place in a woman’s wardrobe. “Another brand might say, ‘Let’s design 30 shirts,’ of which they’ll merchandise 10, and within those 10, they know they’ll have only two to three winners. They feel the customer needs so much newness. We design 10 shirts and find the two to three winners and only launch the two to three we believe in.



“It’s very easy to drive revenue with new categories,” Shah said. “There are so many places we could expand. We’ve been working our way from the top down in apparel. We’re launching our first pants in the fall. We’ll do bottoms, shoes and jewelry.

Cuyana’s designs don’t carry big logos that demand to be noticed. The company puts its branding on zippers. “Our design intent is for minimal branding, so a customer’s [personality] can shine through. We like simple silhouettes, but everything’s in the details. A lot of people add noise. We focus on shape, hardware and functionality with thoughtful details.

“With the lean closet program, we’re not trying to replace the role of Goodwill and the Salvation Army,” Shah said, adding that shoppers may be hesitant to get ride of items “associated with a lot of guilt that you paid too much money for. You spent time and energy to buy them, but giving them to Goodwill isn’t sufficient. You’d more willing, knowing that it’s going to find a home with someone who needs it.”

For every donation made, consumers receive \$10 credit toward their next purchase. “It’s really a token,” Shah said. “The true value is the gifting of the product. We believe fewer, better things will lead to a fuller, richer life. We want women to focus on buying and owning only what they love.”



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