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Shopping for clothes online goes 3-D at Sears

'MY VIRTUAL MODEL' | Try it on, see how it looks from all sides

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Sears may be known as a struggling 122-year-old retailer, but it is making sudden splashes in the young person's world of cyberspace. It will announce today a new way of searching for clothes using photos rather than text, and a three-dimensional, personalized model that allows shoppers to mix and match outfits and accessories.

The Hoffman Estates-based retailer will introduce on Oct. 22 the latest version of "My Virtual Model" on the Web site *Sears.com*.

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Sandy Carter uses a photo of herself to generate a virtual model that's identical to her. (Courtesy)

WOMAN POWERED

Technology experts bemoan a scarcity of female executives, but Sears can brag that its latest modeling technologies resulted from the work of three women.

The visual-search capabilities and three-dimensional aspects of Sears' "My Virtual Model" are the work of Louise Guay, one of the founders and the president of the company by the same name based in Montreal.

Others involved in the *Sears.com* effort were Maureen McGuire, former head of marketing who left Sears in August, and Sandy Carter, vice president of strategy, channels and marketing for WebSphere, IBM's integration software platform.

Sandra Guy

Shoppers can enter their height and measurements and add a photo so the model will look exactly like them, and "try on" a variety of combinations of clothes, shoes, purses and accessories. The current model, a two-dimensional version like a paper doll, offers only a broad size range and one-at-a-time item choices that are superimposed on the model.

The new search process will let shoppers scan an image of a style they like, whether it's from *Cosmopolitan* magazine or any other source that has been digitized, and search for that item from Sears' and other retailers' digitized merchandise.

Shoppers may e-mail their virtual model's outfits to friends and get instant responses on whether the looks work.

The new capabilities reflect a next wave of shopping and appeal to teens who enjoy creating alter-egos known as avatars, as well as to busy career moms who have no time to try on clothes in real life, said Sandy Carter, vice president of strategy, channels and marketing for WebSphere, IBM's integration software platform that runs Sears' online commerce platform.

Features of the online shopping experience include:

- The 3-D model can turn 360 degrees so the shopper can see the clothes from the front, side and back, and shoppers may choose different scenes to place behind the model.
- Shoppers will be able to search for specific styles such as long-sleeve tunic shirts or cropped cargo pants.
- Searches can be done online, from in-store kiosks and via personal digital assistants.

In the future, the virtual shopping process will let shoppers "rate" each others' looks, and enable the best shoppers to act as advisers, said Louise Guay, president and a founder of My Virtual Model, the Montreal-based company that holds the patents to the technology.

Sears swears that people's personal measurements will be kept secret. And WebSphere is committed to keeping the site moving quickly by providing the necessary security, storage space and algorithm optimization.

The Web site requires that shoppers enable "cookies" so that their movements are tracked, presumably so Sears can send them offers on clothes that fit their style. Sears could not provide more details.

Sears got its start in virtual modeling three years ago by leveraging the expertise of preppy clothier Lands' End, which was an early adopter of cutting-edge technology. Sears bought Lands' End for \$1.9 billion five years ago.

Patti Freeman Evans, research director at Jupiter Research, said retailers who have used three-dimensional models benefit from increased online sales and average sales amounts. But the visual components have a ways to go to reflect exact colors and details of big pictures.

"We haven't seen the three-dimensional model hit its tipping point in terms of consumers adopting it," she said.



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