

Go Vintage - How Value Village encourages eco consumption

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By Tanja Matuszis, Contributing Writer



In a fair-minded world, a pair of Prada shoes would be \$20. But, since the world as we know it is never fair, we have to take fashion justice into our own hands by buying vintage to get our private little kicks of affordable designer brands. The savviest among the thrift store crowd know that one of the best spots to buy vintage is Value Village. Founded in 1954, Value Village, also known as Savers across the United States and as Village de Valeurs in Quebec, is a milestone in North America's thrift

store industry. The for-profit, privately held store chain has more than 250 locations and 13,000 employees in North America and Australia, and it is a good bet for clothing finds, as well as electronics, books and household items.

This is how the Value Village model works: local organizations, as well as partners of Value Village, which include nonprofit organizations such as the Canadian Diabetes Association or Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, collect donations of reusable clothing and household goods from the community. The thrift-store chain then pays the organizations for their goods, whether or not those goods make it to the retail floor. The company also pays its nonprofit partners for every donated item brought directly to the Community Donation Centers; this allows the organizations to depend on a steady stream of revenue to support their community services and programs. Value Village guarantees clean and high-quality items by sorting through every donated item; donated items that don't pass the quality check or don't sell within a few weeks are recycled or made available to developing countries.



In 2010, Value Village purchased more than \$127 million of donated goods from its partners, and the company expects a return of 10 to 15 percent for 2010. Profits are important, says Sara Gaugl from Value Village's headquarters in Seattle. Without profits, she says, "we wouldn't be able to maintain the charitable relationships we have or reinvest in our business and expand to meet the needs of local communities." Focusing on local communities is one aspect that makes the Value

Village model work; it not only stimulates local economies, but also allows the company to hire employees from local neighbourhoods who know which trends the local market is looking for.

Walking through the aisles of a Value Village can be somewhat overwhelming. Every day, 5,000 to 10,000 items are added to the sales floor, ready to be discovered by shoppers. Pushing a cart along the rows of pre-loved shirts and shoes, pants and skirts, and bathing suits and underwear in a Toronto Value Village, we experienced first-hand how Value Village unites people of all ages, styles, nations and incomes. An old Portuguese lady looking for a new set of china; a young mother dragging her wailing son behind to check for daycare outfits; a hipster couple examining the spring leather coats and jackets with intensity.



Watching people digging and hunting through the racks, a quote by Coco Chanel came to mind: "...Fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening." Fashion reflects our personality, our lifestyle and the things we value, without putting a label on it. It's the ideas, the creativity, and the rush of discovering and hunting for the best deals that defines vintage shopping. Some customers come to Value Village for economic reasons, while others come for the thrill of hunting. Others shop at Value Village because they know that buying and donating clothes and household items is an eco-friendly way of

consuming.

"People think they need everything to be new. That's a trap," says Hannah Morren, a vintage-lover and devoted Value Village customer. "A lot of people think it's not worthy of them or that it's gross to buy used items. It is silly to buy something new only for the reason of being new. And this is where the trap snaps." According to Hannah's own estimates, she gets 60 percent of her purchases at thrift stores. Her best find so far at a Value Village: a pair of Prada shoes for just \$12.95.

About Tanja Matuszis, Contributing Writer

Toronto-based writer Tanja Matuszis divides her time between assignments in Canada and Germany. Working for print, radio and online media for more than 15 years, Tanja covered stories of the life and culture as well as the political beat. Her every day eco-commitment is riding her bike: "Despite the risk of getting door-kissed and ignored by drivers, I still love it."