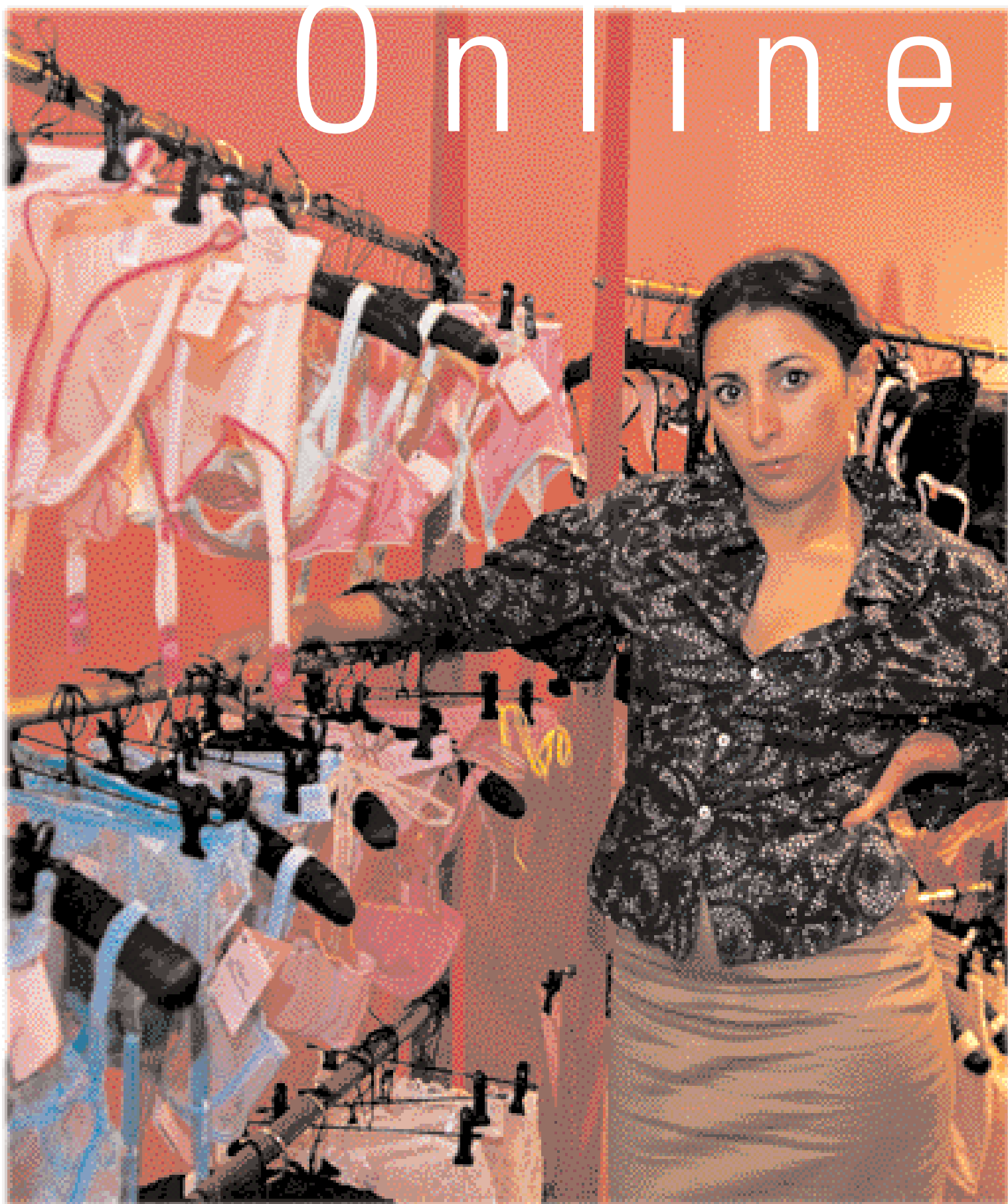


# Online



Serena Rees explains how Agent Provocateur has found success on the internet. **Amanda Nottage** takes a look at the lingerie retailer and its rivals online

notable successes.

Premium lingerie brand Agent Provocateur ([www.agentprovocateur.com](http://www.agentprovocateur.com)) is set to unveil its latest incarnation online to back the launch of its autumn/winter collection. The site is revamped annually by new-media agency Wax to tie in with the fashion season, with both a Flash and html version, giving customers more control over how they shop. Next month will see a

Scantly clad women have always been a popular choice on the web, but users looking for such images were often more interested in the flesh than the lacy underwear. Yet while other e-tailers find life tough online, the lingerie sector has had some

According to Michael Ross, chief executive at underwear digital pureplay figleaves.com, the online lingerie market in the UK will be worth from £30m to £40m this year. One-quarter of that should come through his site, he reckons. Figleaves.com has invested more than £1m in a new look that was unveiled last month and has extended its reach to include the US, as it looks to achieve its target of £50m annual turnover.

Traditional high-street retailers, by contrast, are now treating the web with caution after grand plans unveiled during the boom were seen as too much of a handful and promptly scaled down. Perhaps the most trusted high-street store in the UK when it comes to underwear, Marks & Spencer, has a limited range of undies available on [marksandspencer.com](http://marksandspencer.com).

In 2000, the M&S Ventures arm pumped £1.7m into lingerie start-up Splendour.com, which manufactures its own range of under-

# support

broadband element added to showcase its fashion shows.

There were concerns about taking such a luxury brand online, but it has paid off. From January 2001 to January 2002, the firm achieved a 164 per cent rise in overall sales thanks to the web, with about 84 per cent of mail order sales now originating online.

"We're very much about intimacy and how a customer experiences the Agent Provocateur world," explains Serena Rees, co-founder of the firm. "There were concerns about how that world would look to someone sat at a PC."

James Ghani, managing director at Wax, explains that the site is about more than just products. "It's about seeing trends as they are being set, so you're obliged to do more with the site," he says.

Members of the online Club AP receive news articles and special offers online; about 19,000 users are signed up to receive the newsletters. Agent Provocateur's erotic and playful brand values also have a celebrity feel – co-founder Joseph Corr  is the son of controversial Brit designer Vivienne Westwood – and it has attracted the most celebrated bottom in pop to pose in its silky undies.

The cinema ad of Kylie Minogue in Agent Provocateur lingerie has become one of the most popular viral emails in the UK, topping Lycos' viral email chart for six weeks. It has been downloaded by some 200,000 users. Yet according to Rees, the success of the viral email was not planned. It had wanted to tease users to visit the site to access something special, which would turn out to be the Kylie ad. The film was to be streamed from the site, barring users from downloading it. Two weeks before the campaign broke, though, the ad was leaked to the press, and then a German company distributed it by email.

"We wanted people to go to the site to see it exclusively, but we missed out on a lot of that," she says. "It still sent people to the site, but not as many as we had originally hoped. We still noticed an increase in visits, which was reflected in sales, but it would have been greater had it been kept under wraps."

wear, rather than stocking traditional and fashion brands. However, its support for the site flagged, and it decided to concentrate on its high-street network. "As part of the reorganisation of the business more than a year ago, we refocused on certain core activities," says Peter Robinson, head of e-commerce at M&S. "The big prize is how offline and online integrate. Sales may be researched online and then bought in-store or vice versa. What's important is that it works together."

Ross believes that high-street retailers need online outlets because their stores aren't big enough to carry all the ranges. He points out that figleaves.com carries 12,000 units of stock from more than 100 brands. "For high-street shops, it's a catch-22 situation. They can't justify investing huge amounts in online, yet it would seem churlish to withdraw," he says.

Splendour continues to trade as a stand-alone business, albeit having dropped the .com from its name, and thanks in part to distribution deals with many of M&S' high-street rivals. It now sells its branded underwear in stores across the country, including Debenhams, Allders, House of Fraser, Selfridges, and Top Shop. It has also struck deals in the US.



Agent Provocateur: 84 per cent of mail order sales from web

# Blushing Buyer has a wide customer demographic online



We have to make sure that if someone is looking for condoms or acne treatment, we are there

Steve Aicheler  
Blushing Buyer

Blushing Buyer ([www.blushingbuyer.co.uk](http://www.blushingbuyer.co.uk)) has been trading for almost two years. It offers those little items that might cause shy shoppers flushed cheeks if they had to ask a shop assistant in-store.

Listed on the site's top buys are KY Jelly, Mr Beefy's Condom Credit Card and Aquaflex vaginal weights, although it veers away from vibrators and sex toys.

Online marketing has been a tricky enterprise for the site. According to Steve Aicheler, director at Blushing Buyer, customers are split 50:50 male:female, with ages ranging from 16 to 60, all over the UK. "It makes it hard to do any targeted marketing," he admits. "It seems just about everybody gets embarrassed."

Marketing concentrates on search engine optimisation, pay-per-click on keywords

The screenshot shows the Blushing Buyer website with a pink header and navigation menu. The main content area features a search bar, a list of top products including KY Jelly and Aquaflex vaginal weights, and a section for award winners. The site also displays a 'Which? Web Trade' logo and a list of top sellers.

Blushingbuyer.co.uk: top buys include KY Jelly, a condom credit card and vaginal weights

and placement on Ask Jeeves. "Because it's hard to narrow the demographic, we have to make sure that if someone is looking for condoms or acne treatment, we are there," he says.

The firm has considered advertising with both male and female magazine sites,

but while the fit could be ideal, the price is not. "We only work on a performance-related basis, and most want tenancy deals offering a run of site, which is useless for us," he explains. "It has to be more targeted. If we could sponsor a message board on pregnancy, that would be

great, but often they want a sponsor for all the message boards."

Aicheler confirms that the web works well for anything that causes embarrassment. "The number of emails I get from people who suffer from haemorrhoids is amazing," he says.

Mike O'Shea, chief operating officer at Splendour, admits that when Splendour began, like other e-tailers and to their cost, sales were overestimated. "We were about 10 to 15 years too early in our predictions, but in that time, you will see those staples being bought online," he argues. About 30 per cent of sales are currently based online, with Debenhams the biggest seller of its products in the high street.

Some of the biggest names in underwear are beginning to build their own online brand presence through individual sites, rather than relying on retailers' sites. "We're using the web to communicate what we're up to with Triumph and the other brands in the

group — Sloggi, Hom and Valisere," says Tony Jarvis, sales and marketing director at Triumph International.

"Each of these brands is very different in its target market in both product and brand message, so each site has to be individual," adds Luisa Bright, Triumph International's internet marketing executive. "As we don't have Triumph-branded shops, we need to get the brand message across, and online is probably the only place in the UK where you will see the whole range."

Triumph offers links to e-tailers such as figleaves.com, ample bosom.com and Bravellous.com for online sales. "It's important that once they see the range, users can link through and buy. On key brands such as Triumph and Sloggi, we wouldn't offer our own e-commerce. Being a brand, we want to sell products through retailer distribution networks," says Jarvis.

Other branded microsites hosted by figleaves.com include Wonderbra and supermodel Elle Macpherson's Intimates collection. "Few of the brands are selling online, most don't have web sites and they are not in the retail business," explains Ross. "Lingerie is also a hard category to do online. Getting a good supply is difficult, and firms are rightly protective of their brands. They want to create a site that is true to the brand and marketing campaign, but will then link to a partner."

Of course, online lingerie is not limited to grey marl pants or Won-

The screenshot shows the figleaves.com website with a blue header and navigation menu. The main content area features a 'WOMEN'S SALE' banner with a 50% off discount, a '50% off french & flirty' banner, and a '50% off retro look' banner. The site also displays a list of brands and a 'Voucher for new customers'.

Figleaves.com: invested more than £1m in new-look web site



debras. For those looking to get a bit more playful with their undies, Ann Summers offers an eye-opening range of personal items. Keen to play down its image of a sanitised sex shop and housewives' party favourite, the brand has expanded into the high street and made a concerted push online. While the parties are women-only affairs, the shops and the site ([www.annsummers.com](http://www.annsummers.com)) provide a gateway to its range to both existing female customers and their partners.

Annsunners.com saw a 67 per cent year-on-year rise in sales in December 2001; according to the company, about 400,000 unique visitors have a fumble on the site each month. So the strategy seems to have worked, and the firm recently launched a more adventurous brand online, Ann Summers Uncut ([www.annsummer-suncut.com](http://www.annsummer-suncut.com)).

Online partners drive visitors to the sites, including lastminute.com, which also promotes figleaves.com. Teaming up with major portals has become a strategy for many e-tailers, with figleaves.com counting AOL, MSN, and Freeserve as its top three portal partners for business.

Yet O'Shea's experience at Splendour has been mixed. "We have done online advertising, but most of our ad methods have failed," he admits. "We've concentrated on portal placements and last Christmas we had success with MSN, as it gave us a good placement. But every other online ad has been a failure, and some have been catastrophically bad."

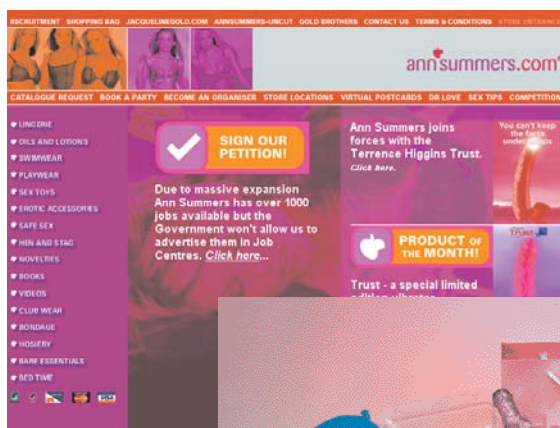
Keen to stick to its chic boutique feel, Agent Provocateur avoids online advertising and banners to focus on promotions through its site. It has recently taken the step of linking up with Ian Schrager Hotels, headed by the former Studio 54 impresario, to offer a 'boudoir' package online. Agent Provocateur finery can be placed in a suite for guests to enjoy on arrival.

Due to the gift market, with peaks around Christmas and St Valentine's Day in particular, men are also buying from the sites. "Men have great difficulty walking into a lingerie store, so this is a great option for them," comments Jill Kenton, director of upmarket lingerie company Rigby & Peller ([www.rigbyandpeller.com](http://www.rigbyandpeller.com)). Agent Provocateur even offers the option of buying two sets of lingerie, differing in size, in case male customers have a 'significant other' to please as well as a wife or girlfriend.

With the male customer in mind, a relevant sector for lingerie retailers to focus on would be men's and adult sites. However, this could have a negative impact on a brand. Fagleaves.com has featured in spreads in men's mags such as FHM, and identifies different types of customer buying from the site. "If we were to advertise on Page3.com, it's unlikely that our Aubard-buying customer would see that," explains Ross.

Kevin Barnes, online marketing manager at Ann Summers, sees possibilities on both men's and women's magazine sites, with its online audience split more evenly. "We'd like to get more partners online, such as New Woman [[www.newwoman.co.uk](http://www.newwoman.co.uk)] or FHM [[www.fhm.com](http://www.fhm.com)]. Ann Summers as a brand is focused more towards the female customer and we want to maintain that, but we want to keep the men coming as well, as they are often shopping for gifts," he says.

"We're finding that the clientele differs from the stores," he adds. "On the high street, it's about 70 per cent women, whereas online it's a more even split." However, the firm's biggest seller online is the same as on the high-street: a pink vibrator called the Rampant



Rabbit, made infamous  
cameo appearance in  
sitcom *Sex and the City*.

But Splendour's O'Shea says he wouldn't want "drag down" his brand being on a lad's site. "We're for women and that's who we explain to," he explains. "Men will only buy more for themselves, which builds a better long-term customer. The male sites don't really work for us."

One of the biggest obstacles lingerie e-tailers face is sizing, as many brands differ slightly. All online sellers also appreciate that there is a tactile element to purchases that cannot be duplicated online. "We want to make big-boobed women feel good about themselves, and much of our customer service happens on the phone or in the fitting room," says Elly Rawstron, marketing manager at Bravissimo ([www.bravissimo.com](http://www.bravissimo.com)). "Bras are not standard sizes—it's like buying shoes, you have to try them on." A mail-order business offering bras in sizes D to JJ, Bravissimo launched online four years ago and now sees up to 15



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Michael Ross  
Figsleaves.com



07 per cent year-on-year rise  
in sales in December 2001

per cent of its business come from the web.

O'Shea reckons that while customers want to touch and see the items, the vast majority of bras sold in the UK are bought without being tried on. "Some of that is through repeat purchases, but if it's winter and it's raining, you dash into a store and just buy. Most sites offer no quibble on returns, anyway," he adds. "You don't want to start arguing with the customers."

There is also an obvious appeal to those embarrassed by making personal purchases, as the web offers a more intimate service for customers. "They can order by phone, but if you're at work in an open plan office, you don't want to be telling someone you're 36FF," jokes Rawstron. □