

FASHION



ANDREW CROWLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH; INSTAGRAM/THREADSTYLING

The woman changing the way we shop for luxury

Sophie Hill tells *Bethan Holt* how she uses social media to take luxury fashion to time-pressed customers

Let's imagine you're searching for the perfect dress for a summer wedding. In fact, most of us probably are right now. The default approach might once have been to dedicate a day to scouring the shops or spending evenings giving yourself RSI from scrolling through endless pages of options on websites. But Sophie Hill, the founder of Threads Styling, is on a mission to bring those of us with money to spend into her brave – and ultra-convenient – new world of “luxury social commerce”.

Threads barely even has a website, but instead does all its business through Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat and, in China, WeChat.

Thanks to Hill's crack team of personal shoppers, there is no tiresome typing of even a “www.” Instead, you simply peruse Threads' Instagram Stories (mini videos that appear for 24 hours on the app), which show Dior gowns being twirled in, Rolex watches touted on wrists or Malone Souliers kitten heels being slipped into, and then swipe through to buy on whichever messaging service is convenient to you.

If it isn't showcasing exactly what you want, or never knew you needed, via its social media channels then you can send screen grabs and photos, or brief personal shoppers, and they'll do the rest of the hard work for you. They then learn what you love and send more recommendations. The majority of Threads' customers are high-net-

worth millennial and Gen Z fashion devotees who require multiple wardrobes for lives that involve flitting from skiing to sun to city in a matter of days. The company's average order value is \$3,343 (£2,455), while the most expensive item ever purchased through the service came in at almost \$1million.

“I think the element of ivory-tower mentality in fashion has really started to change,” says 35-year-old Hill, sitting in her ultra-modern working space in Shoreditch. Gone are the days of feeling intimidated by designer shopping; for Hill and her team, customers are “community” and “real people”. In effect, Threads aims to be your super-stylish, in-the-know friend

Revolutionary: Sophie Hill says the bar for convenience is rising all the time, with Threads Styling finding a global customer base

cent [Threads also takes commission from brands]. I still have no idea how they tracked it down but it arrived via courier and fitted perfectly.”

Threads' super-connected, convenience-demanding customers have also converted their parents and older relatives to the joys of quick and easy luxury shopping. “Millennials are the most influential generation and the impact which they can have on their parents is huge,” Hill marvels. “Research has shown that they influence holidays, fashion and event choices, so they're naturally pulling them into their world. Even the fact that a lot of parents have moved to Instagram so that they can stay in touch with family shows it's definitely not a platform just for the young.”

Hill, who is from Sheffield originally, started Threads in the early 2010s. She had studied sociology and social policy at Leeds before working in a series of buying and merchandising roles at Arcadia. Her initial idea was to service the needs of tourists coming to London or Paris to shop.

“Very quickly, we were looking after several clients in London. I hired a team and within weeks we realised it wasn't about them being here, it was about them being anywhere.”

Now Threads works with “superpower” brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, Fendi and Dior, and offers services across streetwear and contemporary labels such as Alexander Wang through to couture evening wear. The Middle East is a major focus while the Far East is the next growth area. But as Hill stresses, “the location isn't relevant to the customer because it's truly international. We can get pieces from anywhere in the world and deliver them anywhere.”

Threads, which is part of Tech City's Future Fifty businesses and has more than doubled sales on average in the last four years, currently has a 60-strong team but is recruiting for 80 more roles. Of course, in order to bring her vision to revolutionise the shopping experience to life, Hill had to raise capital. The company doesn't speak about exact figures but to be part of Future Fifty, gross revenue for the past 12 months must be at least £5 million. Most recently, investment has come from Horizons Ventures but she has become savvy along the

way to the challenges facing female entrepreneurs.

“I think it's definitely harder when you're selling something which is for a female consumer, but there have definitely been changes. I think that more can and should be done to support female entrepreneurs.”

“Venture firms are moving in the right direction, there have been a lot more female partners appointed in the past year and there's an understanding that there's an incredible landscape of female entrepreneurs with great ideas out there.”

Hill's latest focus is tapping into the transformation in how we buy jewellery, whereby traditional maisons such as Boucheron and Chopard sit alongside modern labels including Foundrae and Suzanne Kalan, and women shop for pieces because they work for real life, rather than waiting for a loved one to buy them something for a special occasion.

“We see ourselves as building the number one global destination for fine jewellery. Social media allows for a very modern yet informal way of actually seeing how something should be worn and can be styled.”

She has recruited Sophie Guy, who used to head up jewellery buying at Net-a-Porter (several of Hill's big hires have come from the original purveyor of online luxury fashion), to head up the new division, and she's already been busy.

“We launched Amrapali last week after noticing our clients wanted more one-of-a-kind pieces,” says Guy. “We are also launching Brooke Gregson this weekend, the perfect layering brand – a trend our women love – in time for summer.”

Life as a fashion entrepreneur is not for the faint-hearted. Hill rises at 5.30am each day, travels a few times a month and has moved next door to the office. She doesn't get home much these days but her parents come down and visit once a month.

“It's really busy,” she says with a squeal of excitement mixed with panic. The hectic schedule doesn't mean she's immune to worrying about where she's going to shop now that Phoebe Philo has left Céline. But, as the consummate styling professional, she of course has a solution: “I'm loving Blazé Milano's jackets. I can see myself wearing them for years to come.”



who always has just the thing and will go to the ends of the earth to secure it for you.

“The bar for convenience is ever increasing. What the consumer expects today is a given tomorrow, any blockers along the journey are quite frustrating,” adds Hill, who has the polished fashion-businesswoman look down pat in a flared Proenza Schouler midi skirt, black cashmere knit and Céline pumps. Her two phones are never far from her fingertips and her hands jangle with Cartier and Van Cleef bangles and rings by Spinelli.

While Hill is clearly most keen to talk up her young, wealthy customers who can't get enough of Elie Saab gowns and Balenciaga Triple S trainers, the Threads proposition has helped plenty of people with more targeted style dilemmas, too.

“I'd had an operation and really didn't feel like going round lots of bridal stores trying things on, but needed a wedding dress as it was late May and I was getting married in mid-August,” says stylist and fashion editor Georgina Lucas. “I found a Maticeski dress I loved the look of online but couldn't find it anywhere. A friend recommended I try Threads so I Whatsapped a picture to them and told them the size I was looking for. Within four hours they had replied saying they'd found it in my size, how much it was, the returns policy and their finding fee, which was about 10 per



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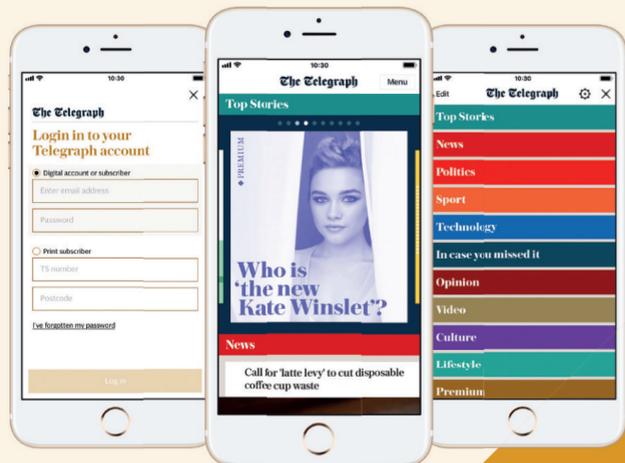
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