

## BOUTIQUE BOUTIQUE...

## A SERIOUS DESIGNER FIX!

**H**ow do you build a thriving business in what is considered an economic crisis? Simple, sell the most desirable and luxury products at a hugely discounted price. Yes girls, although our pay packets may have taken a hammering in recent times, this doesn't affect our need for a designer fashion fix ... Jimmy Choos anyone?

Nicola Brooks opened her designer dress agency in Saffron Walden in the summer of this year and has been delighted with her customers' response. A business idea which responds to a personal need is often a mark of

success, and that's the story of Brooks! Nicola used to visit a designer dress agency in Stapleford regularly, and, having researched the market locally, discovered a gap within it - great news for anyone looking for a Vivienne Westwood suit or Chanel dress at a fraction of the price.

And it was the said Chanel dress hanging lucratively in the corner that made it clear that I wasn't in a secondhand designer shop but a nearly new designer boutique! The dress was in immaculate condition and so current that it was hard to believe someone would be willing to part with such a beautiful item of couture. The dress



was originally purchased for £2500, and is available to buy for £500. Although at £500 it's still very much a considered purchase, it's hard to imagine anyone letting this little beauty pass them by!

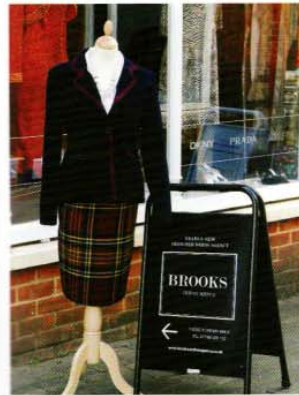
Having sat down over coffee with Nicola it was clear why her business has been so popular to date. She commented,

"I'm a one-of-a-kind dress agency in the area; I stick to my word by only stocking the most sought after labels, and will only display items in the shop if they are in immaculate condition, and of current season. I'm very selective, and turn a lot of stock away, as my shop needs to look like a designer nearly new boutique as opposed to the clichéd second hand shop."

The boutique operates a two way process, which begins with customers bringing their sadly unloved items to the shop. If these items meet Nicola's strict criteria, they will be displayed in the shop for six weeks. If, after six weeks, they have sold, the original owner receives 40% of the selling price. So, not only is Brooks great for those looking to shop, but it's also great for those looking to clear out the closet and make way for the fruits of their latest shopping spree! Nicola is quick to point out that, on nine out of ten occasions, garments do sell.

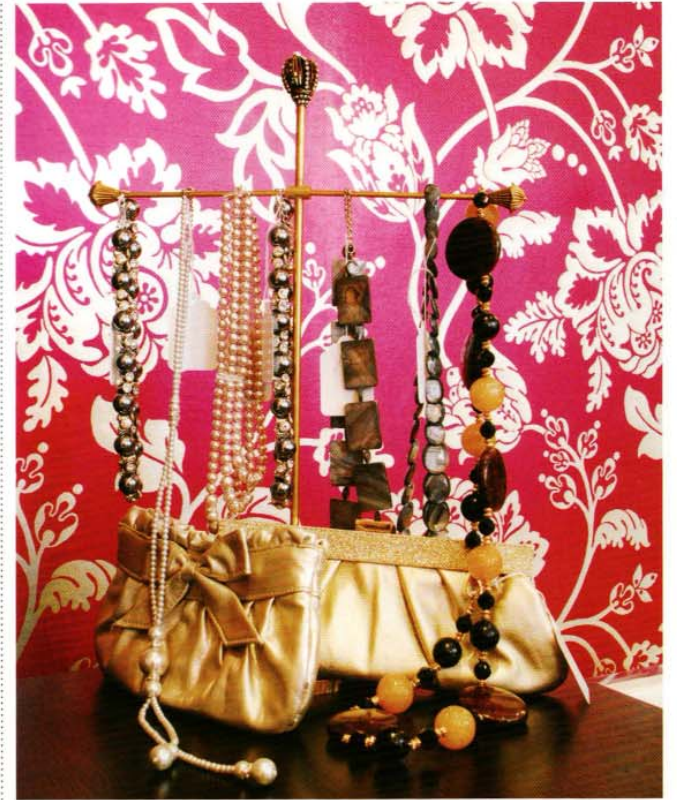
Not having the luxury of stocking new

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goods direct from the designers and getting that instant insight into next season, Nicola and her team have to work hard to anticipate the trends. Having recently returned from London Fashion Week, Nicola will be on the look out for lots of nude soft colours and beautifully unstructured feminine dresses. However, as this season is all about all-out glam party wear, Brooks' Autumn/Winter collection, although full of chunky knits and Max Mara camel coats, is also brimming with party wear. Great if you ask me! Unfortunately I'm no longer the party animal I used to be and my glam party wardrobe rarely gets an outing these days, so what better way to save a few hundred pounds and buy nearly new?

I spotted a bargain - amongst the wraps, fur stoles, pashminas and glitzy



cardigans I found a Goya OTT ball dress, perfect for this year's sophisticated Christmas party, priced at just £90, and was sure that my eyes must be deceiving me! As I'd shown interest in this garment, Nicola explained that this was one of her brand new items, and that a fair percentage of the stock she sells is in fact brand new. Even more reason to investigate what she has on offer! Nicola revealed that because of her connections in the fashion industry, she's invited to all the secret sample sales and trade shows throughout Europe. Gosh, I would love to have a peek in her little black book!

Speaking of little black books, my advice is to get into Brooks' little black book! Oh yes, there's even a waiting list for customers looking out for a particular item or designer label. Nicola explained,

"I have lists of whom to call when something in particular comes in. The most desirable clothing label is Vivienne Westwood for sure! Only last week we had a Westwood dress in in the morning, and by 10.30 a customer had bought it. I'm inundated with designer bag requests such as Gucci, Mulberry and Louis Vuitton and everyone wants a pair of Jimmy Choos. Larger sized clothing is also heavily in demand; we are crying out for some great party items in the size 16 and upwards bracket."

So I'm on THE hottest list to be on, I've purchased a very nice fish tail Vivienne Westwood tartan skirt, all wrapped up in a nice boutique style bag, and I'm leaving Saffron Walden with an extremely smug look on my face! Getting a bargain just makes a girl's day! **Velvet\***

