

# Retailers redress the dressing room

*Some stores are trying to make the fitting room experience less painful*

By **DEB ACORD**

KNIGHT RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

The door won't shut. Or won't open. Or there isn't a door at all. The lights are so bright, they make you look like a junkie. Or so dim they make you look like ... a junkie.

You're sure the walls were painted with a branch instead of a brush. The floor is a minefield, littered with bits of T-shaped plastic tag holders and straight pins. And it's so cramped that by the time you deposit your purse, your shopped-out child and your armload of clothes, you'd be more comfortable standing in your bathtub.

Whether you call it a dressing room or a fitting room, it's often a chamber of horrors for shoppers, mostly women, who go in optimistically and come out drained and shaken.

Some retailers realize the importance of the dressing room. But in many other stores, dressing rooms are stuffy little boxes where women must face their worst fears about themselves alone.

Mention "dressing room" to Karin White and she shudders. "There are about three million other things I'd rather do than go shopping and have to try something on," says White, a Colorado Springs, Colo., accountant who is a confident, outgoing woman ... outside a dressing room.

White is vexed by the size of dressing rooms, often so cramped that customers stand within arm's reach of the mirror. "Who wants to see their thighs that close up?" she says.

Few women in America have thought more about dressing rooms than Cathy Guisewite. The cartoonist, whose comic strip "Cathy" runs daily in newspapers throughout the country, says the mention of a dressing room evokes strong feelings.

Cathy's dressing room travails are well-known to the strip's readers — she has spent much of her adult life traipsing in and out, obsessing over the latest fashions and how they are so unfashionable on her, trying to strike up meaningful relationships with sales people.

Guisewite has come to expect "a horrible little room with bad lighting and a distorted mirror that makes me look my absolute worst."



Having to submit to a dressing room; having to shop at all, is traumatic to Guisewite.

"It's a shocking concept to me," she says. "I have to try something on in the store, take it off, try it on again, walk around in it, buy it, take it home, try it on in front of various mirrors in my house, then take it back."

Some retailers understand the importance of the dressing room. Recently, Gap announced plans to install call buttons in its Gap-brand fitting rooms later in the year. Customers trying on clothes will be able to call sales associates to request a different size or color.

"We're always looking at ways to improve the customer's shopping

experience," says Anna Lonergan, Gap spokeswoman in New York. "We know that shoppers need to feel comfortable. The dressing room is an absolute part of the shopping experience."

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JERILEE BENNETT/COLORADO SPRINGS GAZETTE

experience," says Anna Lonergan, Gap spokeswoman in New York. "We know that shoppers need to feel comfortable. The dressing room is an absolute part of the shopping experience."

Regina Rushing, owner of Regina's Unique Boutique and Regina's Shoe Box in Colorado Springs, has appointed her dressing rooms with contemporary chairs, ivy-stenciled walls and soft, light-pink spotlights. Giant skylights let in natural light, and a three-way mirror is in one corner. A children's area is stocked with toys just outside the fitting rooms.

"Sometimes" Rushing says, "a dressing room experience can make or break a sale." So she chose curtains instead of doors, so she and her staff can communicate easily with the customers.

Just down the street from Regina's, customers feel equally comfortable but it's not like home. Unless home is a tent.

At Timbuktu Station, manager Jennifer Zanini and assistant manager Maureen McKenna direct customers to dressing tents reminiscent of an African desert.

"We're a travel store, and we are trying to evoke that feeling of the desert," Zanini says. "So we designed our dressing rooms when we designed the store."