By RACHEL STRUGATZ.

THEY ARE the anti-Amazons.
The buzziest e-commerce players right now all have the same M.O. — a laser focus on a specific category, from sneakers and boots to jewelry, eyewear and innerwear. Where Amazon started with books but now offers almost everything, these companies are sticking to only one category — and doing it better than anyone else. The success of Warby Parker in eyeglasses, Bonobos in men’s wear, BaubleBar in jewelry and Everlane in luxury basics has spawned a host of others following the same strategy — and hoping to hit it rich in the process. Of course, that depends on how rapidly they can build brand awareness and scale. If that isn’t challenge enough, the other caution is that even 20 years after it was founded, Amazon is still bleeding red ink. If that isn’t challenge enough, the other caution is that even 20 years after it was founded, Amazon is still bleeding red ink.

But the Internet age is all about entrepreneurs, and this month alone saw three category-specific launches:

■ The Arrivals: An e-commerce site that’s trying to solve the conundrum of delivering high-quality, fashion-forward outerwear at a reasonable price.

■ Thursday Boot Company: Two Columbia Business School buddies’ take on well-made men’s boots that don’t break the bank.

■ Glossier: Founded by Emily Weiss of Into the Gloss, it offers functional beauty products with a smart design.

These come fast on the heels of other entrants over the past year or so, including Negative Underwear, The Greats, MM.LaFleur and Ayer — a vertical innerwear line, a men’s sneaker brand, professional women’s clothing and Bonobos’ sister line of women’s separates, respectively. Three-year-old Everlane, which co-founder and chief executive officer Michael Preysman projects founder and chief executive of New York said, is privately funded, declined to disclose sales projections for the first year.

Thursday Boot Company has already sold nearly $185,000 worth of boots through a Kickstarter presale campaign that started Oct. 3 via its site getthursday.com. This will allow co-founders Nolan Walsh and Connor Wilson to gain insight into inventory management, and maintain their $199 price point. To date, they have already sold about 655 pairs of boots.

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“Thursday is the star of the weekend,” Wilson said of naming the company. “We want something that’s versatile enough; if it rains, not a

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Redefining by Staying Focused

(Continued from page 12)

BONOBOS/AYR
Founder: Andy Dunn
Category: Men’s wear, women’s wear

Babenzien, who said the ma-
jority of the brand’s product
sold out within the first 90 days,
raised a seed round of $1.5
million that closed in April.
Babenzien claimed the compa-
ny has been cash flow positive
since June and will turn a profit
in January.
“We’re considering a Series
A round [of funding] for growth,
but the reality is that we are
not in need of capital, which is
uncommon. We are in a sound
position financially,” Babenzien
said. He projects sales of $2.4
million for the year, with 40 per-
cent of purchases coming from a
red fieldhouse opened on Oct.
18, and Babenzien contended
that half of the company’s total
revenue for the entire weekend
came from the 250-square-foot
space’s first weekend in busi-
ness.
“We always said we were
going to open The Greats
stores,” Babenzien said. “That’s
been in our plan from Day One
— whereas a lot of others have
discovered the value of retail
[later on]. Third-party retail is
where it gets tricky. You’re rely-
ing on another retailer to mer-
chandise and sell your product.”

Babenzien has held back

mobile device.
Currently, there are three
styles: the Bab and the Wilson,
which each retail for $39, and
the Royale — a handmade
snaker that comes in leather
or suede, ranging in price from
$139 to $178, depending on fab-
rication. Ten new silhouettes
will be introduced through the
second quarter of next year,
which is also when Babenzien
wants to open the first Greats
freestanding store.

The brand dabbled in retail
pretty early on — opening a tiny
Fieldhouse below its office on
Kant Avenue in Williamsburg
last December that was only
open on weekends. An expand-

imagine by Bonobos founder
and chief executive officer Andy
Dunn, the one-year-old freestand-
ing Guideshop — Bonobos itself
has ten, with plans to open
30 additional locations in the
next two years — give consum-
ers access to every style and
help them try on and order what
they wish and then have deliver-
ies shipped to their homes.

The Ay line, which ranges
from $50 for a graphic T to
$525 for a coat made of Italian
wool, is also expanding into
wholesale through a partner-
ship with Shopbop.
He admitted that he was un-
sure if women would like the
Guideshop model — where they
were unable to walk out with
the looks — but positive feed-
back has given Dunn the con-
dence he needed to plan to open
the first freestanding Ay store
in New York next year (the cur-
rent Guideshop operates out of
the store’s back room here).
“It took Bonobos one year
to do what Ay did in seven
months,” Dunn said of Ay’s ac-
celerated growth rate. “Ay’s been
able to take a lot of learn-
ings from Bonobos and apply
them faster. We were in year
four or five by the time we test-
ed a Guideshop and had our
first wholesale partnership.”

For instance, Ay hit $1 million
in sales in September — ahead of
schedule and five months sooner
than it took Bonobos to reach the
same milestone.

Negative Underwear co-
founders Marissa Vosper and
Lauren Schwab said that their
brand is starting to explore of-
line opportunities as they ap-
proach one year in business.
They have confirmed a targeted
 offline presence for the holiday
season (they can’t reveal the part-
ner yet) and are in the midst of
devising a Valentine’s Day
strategy that merges online and
offline. A range of white under-
pinnings will roll out for holi-
day, followed by a nude collec-
tion in February — the result of
“clear and consistent demand”
from customers for more colors.

“We think it’s important
to always have a balance of
both — especially for a prod-
uct that’s highly tactile and
service based,” Vosper said.
“We continue approaching ev-
everything as an experiment for
this first year and will be re-
ally interested to see how our
Valentine’s Day/One Year per-
forms next to launch with tri-
ple the product offers.”

The Greats, the sneaker
brand that celebrated a year
in business in August, is also
starting to look at offline op-
opportunities in a significant
way. Co-founder and ceo Ryan

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from global distribution, mak-
ing the point that if a customer is paying $59 for footwear and
$40 to ship it, then they are bet-
ter off buying something else in
their local market. This, how-
ever, has not stopped a wealthy
Hong Kong man from purchas-
ing $23,000 worth of Bab sneak-
ers, having them sent to a U.S.
address and then shipping them
to Hong Kong so he can sell them for $15 more than the
Greats’ retail price.

“From a brand-building per-
spective that is magic — to be a
one-year-old brand with a sec-
ondary market in Hong Kong,”
Babenzien said.

(WARBY PARKER
Founders: Dave Gilboa
with Neil Blumenthal
(Andy Hunt and Jeff
Raider not pictured).
Category: Eyewear

The customers felt quite alienated
or disconnected and didn’t feel that
brands spoke to them.
That is what initiated this.
— THOMAI SERDARI, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

BAUBLEBAR
Founders: Daniella Yacobovsky, Amy Jain
Category: Jewelry

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FASHION MEETS TECH

monday, october 27, 2014

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fashion meets tech

Redefining by Staying Focused

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While many of the early verti-
cal players eventually expanded into
offline retail a year or more after they launched, now brands
like Weiss’ Glossier are think-
ing about the strategy from
the get-go. Weiss launched her four-
product beauty range with a
nearly simultaneous online and
offline experience.

“We started with four prod-
ucts because we want to paint
a new picture of beauty — both
aesthetically and distribution-
wise, to the fact that we were
making luxury products at a
super-accessible price point,”
Weiss said of Glossier’s of-
ferings, which include an $18
soothing rosewater face mist,
a $25 priming moisturizer, a
$26 perfecting skin tint and the
$12 Balm Dotcom (a universal
skin salve). “We’re rethinking
means and what the luxury ex-
perience should give you. We
want to be friendly.”

A boxed “Glossier Phase 1 Set” of the four items retails for
$80 at glossier.com and at the
brand’s pop-up on Lafayette
Street in Manhattan, which is
open Tuesdays through Sundays
until Nov. 2.

Weiss is intent on having a
close relationship with her con-
sumer — she checks the brand’s
Instagram account through-
out the day for comments, up-
loads images with the hashtag
#glossier and directs messages
from fans and customers. In
fact, she launched the brand on
the social platform — starting
an Instagram account a month
before the Web site went live.
She’s been frequenting the pop-
up on weekends, clad in a lab
coat that she dyed pink to match
the brand’s signature pastel-
pink packaging.

When asked if she would
ever wholesale the collection,
Weiss was quick to respond:
“Never say never. Instagram
didn’t exist four years ago,
and we just built a brand on it.

We’ll go where our customer
wants us.”

Sarah LaFleur cofounded
MM.LaFleur, what she calls a
line of “better workwear,”
with Narie Foster and Miyako
Nakamura, who spent seven
years at Zac Posen as head
designer. Since launching in
January 2013, the company has
secured $2 million in funding
to date and projects sales in the
few millions for this year.

Classic dresses in silhou-
ettes, such as A-line or short-
sleeve, with a pencil-skirt rang-
ing in price from $150 to $220,
and more elevated styles —
think ruching with a more day-
to-night feel — retailing for a
bit more. Prices start at $45 for
a belt and top out at $485 for a
cost. The site launched with
dresses but has since expand-
ed to blazers, sweaters, belts,
scarves, skirts and tops.

LaFleur said that the Bento
Box — a box of six to seven
items that are sent to every new
client (everything is designed
in-house) after filling out a brief
survey about their personal
style — has become the brand’s
fixture. Potential customers
keep what they want and send
back what they don’t like.

Although the three began
by hosting trunk shows for col-
leagues and friends leading up
to the launch of mmalfleur.com,
the company has yet to estab-
lish an official retail presence.
A SoHo headquarters right now
doubles as a showroom for con-
sumers who want to make an ap-
pointment to try on the clothing.

LaFleur said wholesale is off
question how big Warby Parker
can become if it remains a pri-
ivate-label eyewear brand. Sure,
Luxottiera and Safilo are mul-
tibillion-dollar businesses, but
that is with designer licenses.
Will Warby have to expand into
other categories?

“Definitely not,” according
to cofounder Neil Blumenthal.
To him, focus is the key ingredi-
ent for success — especially for
eyewear. He sees how having a few
very large companies dominat-
ing the space actually benefits
Warby Parker.

“Eyewear is a massive cate-
gory that was ripe for disruption
when we entered — [meaning]
high prices and low value, domi-
nated by a few large companies
with licenses, with less than 1
percent online penetration,”
Blumenthal said.

The brand’s first collection
included only custom acetate
frames with single vision pre-
scription lenses, but by the fol-
lowing year they expanded the
range to include sunglasses, and
Titanium and mixed-material
frames the year after that.

“This year, we introduced
progressive lenses, which en-
abled us to serve a completely
new customer segment. By stay-
ning focused, we’ve been able
to spend time on design, to create
special customer experiences
and to optimize different areas
of the business. As we master
one area, we’re able to take on
more and more,” he added.

Blumenthal, along with co-
founder Dave Gilboa, are natu-
rally optimistic about the future.
For them, the growth lies in
perfecting all facets of eyewear
and increasing distribution
channels, not bulking up the
product range. And it very well
might work. By yearend, Warby
Parker will have ten freestand-
ing doors across the U.S. — a
San Francisco unit will open at
the end of November and a con-
cept store will bow in Chicago
around the same time. The two

THE GREATS
Founders: Ryan Babenzien
Category: Sneakers

NEGATIVE UNDERWEAR
Founders: Marissa Vosper, Lauren Schwab
Category: Innerwear

MM.LAFLEUR
Founders: Narie Foster, Miyako Nakamura and Sarah LaFleur.
Category: Women’s workwear

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