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# The Iconic prompts industry to 'take notice' of people with disabilities



**Ruth Hogan**

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This week, online marketplace The Iconic became the first major ANZ retailer to launch a tailored shopping destination for people with disability, marking a major step forward for inclusivity in fashion.

The Adaptive Edit focuses on functional style with features such as fits for prosthetics, a variety of closures and seated-wear.

The Edit will launch with 130+ pieces across menswear, womenswear and kidswear from brands such as Tommy Hilfiger Adaptive, Brisbane's Christina Stephens, and Melbourne-based JAM The Label, created by Australian occupational therapists, Emma Clegg and Molly Rogers.

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The Iconic CEO Erica Berchtold said the launch is an important milestone for the business but she noted there is more to be done to meet the diverse needs of every customer.

“While we are proud to be launching this tailored edit, in doing so we recognise that there's much more work to do. And so for us, The Iconic Adaptive Edit is only the beginning as we continue to drive progress towards a more inclusive, accessible and empowering shopping experience for every ANZ customer, irrespective of ability,” Berchtold said.

## Push for change

The move follows pressure from others in the industry to step up. Six months ago, adaptive fashion label Christina Stephens called on major retailers, including The Iconic, to embrace this segment.

Christina Stephens founder Jessie Sadler praised The Iconic for their vision and leadership with this launch.

“With the introduction of The Iconic’s Adaptive Edit, I think we will start seeing major psychological, emotional and commercial benefits to many,” Sadler told *Inside Retail*, saying this segment (20 per cent) of the market has been largely ignored until recently.

“It’s been a major oversight and market failure. It also means this group of consumers have been devalued in the eyes of major retailers ... until now,” she said.

“I imagine there will be considerable interest by other ‘mainstream retailers’ now and all eyes will be on The Iconic to observe their success and next steps. Now’s the time for retailers to sit up and take notice, to diversify their offering and take advantage of opportunities that will come from providing for the disability market.”

Christina Stephens was launched 18 months ago with a mission to bring ‘adaptive and inclusive clothing to the mainstream’. And its launch this week on The Iconic brings that vision to reality.

“The idea for the business came about after my mum (the Christine in ‘Christina’) had a fall and badly damaged both of her elbows, rendering dressing in her unique and edgy style, near impossible,” Sadler said.

“We had a look online for clothing options and were both really unimpressed by the results. So I started asking questions, talking to potential customers and sketching, a lot! Out of that came Christina Stephens. We very quickly evolved from creating ‘clothing for women with changing bodies’ and using shy, subtle language to ‘creating fashion for women with disabilities and changing bodies’ and using language that simply and clearly describes what we do.”

While the brand is currently focused on womenswear, Sadler is working on a menswear range which will be previewed later this year.

## **Slow to adapt**

Adaptive fashion has been slow to grow in Australia leaving the one-in-five people with disability in the country with limited options.

“There are a handful of forward-thinking, homegrown, off-the-shelf adaptive labels available. There are a few more quality, international labels available in Australia. And thanks to innovative, niche retailers like Every Human and

**Averee** – there has been *some* adaptive fashion available in the past couple of years,” Sadler said.

“But just imagine you needed new work-wear, or had your sister’s wedding to attend or (heaven forbid!) wanted some sexy lingerie. As a person with a disability, what are your options in Australia today? They are pretty limited. You have to search hard. You have to compromise. You often need to purchase gender neutral, one-size fits-all, and sometimes very clinical looking fashion. And even then, you’ll probably have to make alterations to make them work for you.”

Since stylist Donna Cameron first wrote about adaptive fashion in 2013, she hasn’t seen much change locally. She believes brands need to push the boundaries when it comes to style and treat people as individuals rather than as one.

“Most adaptive fashion available in Australia is either conservative or sporty in style. There is more colour and interest in some of the European lines. Adaptive fashion here is still playing it very safe, but brands may be missing out on sales by doing so as people with disabilities can be just as edgy in their style as anyone. Style needs to be as important a consideration in the design as the functionality is,” Cameron told *Inside Retail*.

“There are numerous edgy and stylish people with disabilities on social media now who are all pushing the style boundaries and this is only increasing as expectations of inclusiveness in society grow.”

## Ripple effect

Cameron predicts the move by The Iconic will have a ripple effect throughout the broader fashion industry, saying that fashion brands could [work with people with disability](#) to tweak designs to make them suitable for both the mainstream and disability markets.

“By working with the end users (or wearers) of a garment, brands have the capacity to increase their target markets through a minor investment of time and resources. In theory, this will also increase the style offerings for those with disabilities,” she said.

“Also, by being inclusive in their choice of models, The Iconic may encourage other labels to be more inclusive, and this will win fans (and potentially sales). Almost everyone has a friend or family member with a disability and would like to see them represented in media more frequently.”

## Accessibility on all fronts

While Cameron praised The Iconic for leading the way in bringing adaptive fashion to a mainstream platform and for using models with disabilities, she raised concerns about the price point.

“The price point of most of the clothes is prohibitive for many people with disabilities (approximately 50 per cent of whom live below the poverty line) so the success rate might be less than ideal,” she said.

She suggests The Iconic follow in the footsteps of adaptive fashion label Every Human which has sought approval from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to become a registered provider.

While [Every Human](#) is not an approved provider just yet, it encourages customers to purchase products through their Low Cost Assistive Technology Support budget if they can.

Christina Stephens also works closely with the NDIS to understand the funding model and how to streamline that funding into our customers' shopping experience.

Sadler said one of the biggest challenges is around inclusive language and accessible communications, highlighting the importance of Alt Text on websites and technology aids for a smooth shopping experience. She also pays close attention to the preparation of accessible campaign shoots, which factors in the timing, training, language, parking, change rooms, bathrooms and space required.

“We agree to compromise on what we want from images and video, for what our models can comfortably and practically achieve. An example from The Iconic that I was instantly impressed with is, they have a very prescriptive image specification for their site; front, side, back, style, feature, texture. But “back” is not always practical or achievable for someone in a wheelchair. This was immediately understood by the team at The Iconic and we all adapted,” Sadler said.

But Sadler said any business diversification takes time. And as a person living *without* disability, she said she's still learning.

“The risk is not that retailers feel they need to have their entire offering 100 per cent perfect and accessible for their new customers overnight. The risk is if they don't even try. If they don't demonstrate the ability to listen, learn and take action over an acceptable period of time.”



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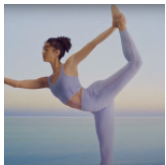
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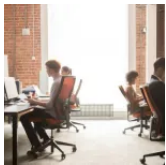
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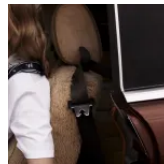
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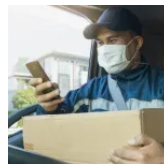
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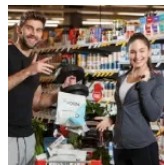
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