

Basement hopes for bounce of the century

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Filene's Basement is launching its biggest advertising campaign in a decade, with network and cable television spots, newspaper ads, and gift card giveaways to celebrate the brand's 100th anniversary.

As Filene's Basement enters its first holiday season after emerging from bankruptcy protection this summer, new owner Marcy Syms wants to make a splash with the historic company that claims to have invented the bargain.

"We want to make sure that we reach as many people as possible to let them know Filene's Basement is still here and we are stronger than ever," Syms said in a phone interview yesterday. "We are the place where bargains were born and never go out of style."

The campaign, totaling over \$1 million, includes commercials on "Good Morning America," the "Today" show, and the "Early Show" during this week's launch and during the week of Thanksgiving. Filene's workers at the company's 23 stores are now wearing "Where Bargains Were Born" T-shirts and buttons, and consumers can purchase their own anniversary mugs and T-shirts at the shops.

Filene's Basement was founded in Downtown Crossing in 1909 by Edward A. Filene as a way to sell excess merchandise from his father's department store upstairs. The business, famed for its "Running of the Brides" events, expanded to nearly 56 stores in the mid-1990s, but later had to pull back because it opened in markets where the brand was unknown and the merchandise too similar to what other retailers were offering.

By 2000, Filene's Basement had shrunk to 14 stores and filed for bankruptcy protection. Over the past decade, the new owners tried to make over the brand with more upscale inventory, fancier stores, and prime real estate, including on Newbury Street in Boston. But the historic brand struggled, especially with the closure of the flagship store in Downtown Crossing. The legendary location at Washington Street has been shuttered since 2007, and developers who had planned to redevelop the store have been unable to secure financing to move forward.

Growing problems at Filene's Basement over the past year led the chain to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in May.

After a lengthy auction, discounter [Syms Corp.](#) unseated Men's Wearhouse as the winner of Filene's Basement chain, paying \$62.4 million for the bankrupt business. Since then, Syms chief executive Marcy Syms has worked to replenish the merchandise at the 23 operating stores and met with real estate officials to search for a new site in Downtown Crossing. Syms, in an interview, said she is continuing to negotiate with [Vornado Realty Trust](#), one of the developers for the Filene's project.

At the same time, Filene's Basement is gearing up for the holiday season with its marketing campaign emphasizing its legacy of bargains. The advertisements show customers raving about designer goods at Filene's Basement, and a six-minute 100th anniversary DVD will be aired in stores featuring footage from a documentary film on the history of Filene's Basement. The store promotions include free \$10 gift cards, free anniversary T-shirts, and up to \$200 off men's suits.

Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys, a New York City marketing firm, said it is particularly important for Filene's Basement to get in front of consumers with its value offerings as other retailers jockey for that space during the recession.

"Filene's Basement was the place that invented getting value for your dollar, and it really needs to tell its heritage story and positioning," Passikoff said. "They can't afford to let that positioning slip away."

Shopper Bernadette O'Neil of Newton browsed the designer purses yesterday at the Filene's Basement in the Back Bay, but ultimately opted not to purchase the \$160 Valentino bag.

"I've been shopping at Filene's Basement for 100 years, all my life," O'Neil joked. "It's just a lot of fun."

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