

# LICENSED FASHION GAINS VALUE FROM HIGH-QUALITY DESIGN AND LOW PRICES

by Laurie Leahey

In the world of fashion, it's always about the next big trend. But sometimes, the next big trend isn't new at all. "This year has been an odd one. Everybody's very careful," says Vered Nisim, vice-president of marketing for JH Design Group. "They'd rather go with what they know from previous years as opposed to something new. It's been difficult to latch onto what's new because people have really feared the new."

That's not to say that fashion has become stale and boring—just another logo on a T-shirt. It simply means that, in terms of fashion licensing, everyone is finding new ways of refreshing what already works. "You have to be a little more creative to make your deals and find the stronger companies to represent your brands to make sure that you're standing strong," says Judi Seidman, president of InGroup Licensing. "The business has changed in the past two to three years because of the economy. Everybody reorganized moving forward."

Thanks to the economy, one of the trends most people are still talking about is fashion combined with value. "It's got to be designed right and priced right," says Ed Casey, vice-president of Stone America Licensing. "People are migrating toward brands that exist in the mid-tier and they are looking for value for their fashion dollar. If it doesn't have fashion, it won't sell



JEM Sportswear and Awake produce Twilight-inspired apparel.



For The Henry Ford, a national historic landmark in Dearborn, Mich., licensee Bell Ranger interpreted photographs from The Henry Ford's archives into T-shirts, giving the shirts an authentic feel. MODA International is The Henry Ford's licensing agent.

no matter what the price is."

But price alone does not determine value. Consumers might find a licensed apparel product valuable if it strikes an emotional chord while appealing to their sense of fashion. Because of this, it's important for brands to work with licensees that not only understand fashion, but that also understand the brand and can seamlessly work it into apparel. "We challenge the licensees to really look for the unique design cues that can be taken from the core brand to make the licensed product authentic," says Lisa Reiner, senior vice-president,

brand management, The Beanstalk Group. "That can come in the form of a color, shape, or hardware detail."

For brands such as Vespa and Ford, licensees often interpret these "hard" items into rivets on jeans or a unique zipper pull. Consumers can tell when licensed apparel isn't true to the brand. If the licensed apparel eliminates the emotional connec-

tion a consumer has with the core brand, the consumer will likely pass over that branded product for another brand.

Merging fashion with value gets a little easier when the brand itself is a fashion brand. The trend of high-end fashion designers partnering with mid-tier and mass-market retailers has expanded over the past year. Miley Cyrus and Max Azria partnered with Walmart, Jimmy Choo partnered with H&M, and Stella McCartney did babyGap and GapKids lines for Gap. "Collaborations are a way for us to introduce our customers to designers they might not have access to," says Kimberly Terry, senior manager of engagement marketing and public relations for Gap. Up until the end of January, consumers without the monetary means to purchase a Rodarte dress could pop over to Target for something more affordable from the fashion label but with the same fashion sensibilities as its high-end counterpart. Joshua Thomas, Target spokesperson, says that the goal of Target's GO International program "is to create an assortment that offers cutting-edge, inspired choices at costs lower than traditional designer prices." That

philosophy applies to any type of apparel—shoes, jackets, dresses, T-shirts.

Yes, T-shirts. While a legitimate category for many successful brands and properties, the fashion licensing industry knows that slapping a logo onto a simple T-shirt and calling it a day no longer works—at least not to attract anyone outside of the core consumer base. The whole point of licensing is to expand the brand and reach additional consumers who might not have given the brand much thought in its core form. One consumer might like a licensed T-shirt because he is a fan of the core brand, while another consumer might like the T-shirt because of the cool design. So many licensees produce T-shirts these days that it's important to create something that stands out and aesthetically appeals to consumers.

Mighty Fine, known for its fashion-forward T-shirts, takes inspiration from what consumers are wearing on the street, then applies those trends to its licenses. "We treat everything like it's artwork," says Sara Scargall, marketing director, Mighty Fine. "We take all of our licenses and combine them with what's going on and what's trending and put them in fashion bodies and the right treatment and create one-of-a-kind [apparel]."

Even unique packaging can make a T-shirt stand out among others. JH Design Group's Nisim says that its Coca-Cola T-shirts come packaged in Coca-Cola bottles or cans and its

M&M's T-shirts are packaged in M&M's candy bags. "There are different ways to create buzz about a T-shirt and not have it be your average, simple T-shirt," she says.

Another way is to diversify a licensed apparel collection, offering more than just T-shirts and, therefore, more options than the competition. "Licensing strategies that target

sive show is also a time for licensors to sign new licensees or partner with new manufacturers. "It sets the stage to debut and promote the new collections into the fashion industry," says The Beanstalk Group's Reiner. "You're getting direct retail feedback from around the world and it represents part of the largest retail buying power in the U.S."



This year, MAGIC will be held on two campuses: The Las Vegas Convention Center for women's wear and Mandalay Bay Convention Center for men's wear. Alongside the women's campus will be FN Platform, a new comprehensive footwear event for men's, women's, and kids' shoes, and POOLTRADESHOW, a destination for emerging art and design-driven brands. These changes were put into place in order to create a more streamlined and convenient show experience.

Even as MAGIC and fashion trends may change, one aspect of fashion licensing will not—innovation. Finding new ways to make high-quality, fashionable apparel at the

right price helps brands stand out in a saturated marketplace. "It's incumbent on all of the licensees and brand owners to come up with innovative ways of presenting product to the consumer that won't easily be replicated," says Sharon Summer, senior vice-president, MODA International. "If you have a product that really is new and can attract a consumer's attention, you really can break through the clutter because there are a lot of brands out there and not a lot of shelf space."

apparel collections require licensees that develop and sell collections and the avoidance of augmenting such programs with T-shirt licensees," says Debra Joester, president of The Joester Loria Group.

At MAGIC Marketplace, February 16–18 in Las Vegas, the fashion licensing industry will be able to see the newest licensed apparel collections and get up to date on new fashion trends. Bringing everyone from the fashion industry under one roof, this comprehen-