



2009 Trends

Trends from The 2009 Travel Goods Show

By Garrett Lai

If The Travel Goods Show itself had a trend this year, it was simplify. Whether you were an exhibitor, an attendee, or even part of The Show itself, this year's program was one of intense focus, stripped for performance like a purpose-built race car.

Some of the perennial big exhibitors, outfits that would normally bring the entire product line, chose to leave their long-lived items at home. Instead, they employed downsized booths to showcase their latest-and-greatest creations, which gave their exhibits the sort of fresh, new flavor normally found with new exhibitors.

Buyers weren't content to just visit the same-old same-old vendors — they were actively on the prowl, looking for the Next Great Thing.

Even the TGA booth made some adjustments, with more of a lounge-like space that provided free coffee and comfy sofas and chairs, which were readily commandeered by footsore buyers and vendors alike for impromptu meetings and get-togethers.

The result of all this change? A fresh take on The Show, one focused on new items that played up excitement and discovery. "This year, I think people were so sad and frustrated when they came in the door," said Leslee Richards of Lieber's Luggage in Albuquerque, New Mexico, referencing the recessionary economic climate. "But I thought the energy actually improved over the three days of The Show — you could feel it. People were like, 'Hey, this isn't the end of the world as we know it.' I think peo-

ple realized they could fight back, and I thought that was a great thing."

Between this sudden focus on new-for-the-season, along with a slate of 76 new exhibitors, this year's Show was a celebration of invention and innovation, and really did provide an optimistic, uplifting mood for attendees and exhibitors alike.

While there is no substitute for walking the aisles and seeing for yourself, here's a sampler of wares and exhibitors that point to some of the larger trends we spied at the world's largest travel goods exhibition.

Light Weight is the Thing

If there was a single overarching theme at this year's Show, it was weight. Weight has always been an issue, but never more so than now.

At Show time last year, the luggage buzz was the "one-checked-bag-per-passenger" airline baggage policy, which created renewed interest in 30"+ bags as customers hoped to dodge second-bag charges. But in the past year, revenue-starved airlines have begun rigorous enforcement of the 50-pound limit for each checked bag, with hefty overweight fees being levied on a regular basis.

There's nothing that motivates travelers more than hitting them in the pocketbook. And since overweight charges can easily tack another 50% onto bargain fares, customers have never been more weight conscious.

Light weight was a nice selling feature a year or two ago. Today it's imperative, not just to have something that's light, but for customers to *know* just how heavy their stuff is. And that's

why luggage scales have become some of this year's must-have items.

Take-along scales are where it's at. They're small and compact, so you can use them for both outbound and return flights. And while any baggage scale can give you bag weight, fancier ones will have features like short-term memory so you can set the bag down and then read the scale. They're not all created equal — some are more feature-laden than others.

Standing on the bathroom scale, bag in hand, and then subtracting your body weight is no longer going to cut it. That might work for the outbound leg, but how will you know whether all those Disney World souvenirs and trade show brochures have tipped the balance to the 50+-pound mark?

Light Flight's \$39.95 scale allows for two-hand lifting, with the weight readout on top, where it's easy to see as you heft your bag. Switchable between pounds and kilos, it comes with an adjustable overweight warning so you don't even need to read the display — blue means you're good to go, red means you might want to think again.

Heys USA takes on two of this year's Show trends — weight awareness and environmental consciousness — with the \$30 eSCALE, the first solar-powered luggage scale.

Travelite's Luggage Scale includes an LED flashlight, and an alert that's tripped when the bag exceeds the 50-pound standard applied by most airlines.

Balanzza, which debuted as a new exhibitor at last year's Show, came with its new \$29.99 Balanzza Too, which incorporates a timer/alarm (no more oversleeping anxiety from unreliable hotel alarm clocks) and LED flashlight into its trademark luggage scale.

Lightweight luggage has always been a big deal, but this year it's become



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the feature, especially for big bags.

Trying to get a 30" bag to slide under that 50-pound overweight limit can be tricky, but it's worth the effort to avoid second-bag fees (not to mention the awkwardness of carting two bags around).

But big bags weigh more — it's not uncommon for them to tip the scales at 15 pounds or more, which consumes a whopping 30 percent of the per-bag weight allotment.

Almost every manufacturer has a lightweight line, and they received a lot of attention at this year's Show, but nobody received more attention than Landor & Hawa. The Sub Zero G Luggage Collection was a real eyebrow raiser (and winner of this year's first place TGA Product Innovation Award). A fiberglass perimeter frame gives it shape, lightweight tubular handles and two-wheel design keep things minimally light, and this is what lets the 28.5" case tip the scales at less than 6 pounds, with 26", 23" and 19" models to back it up. Consumers might shy away from the lightweight construction, but with an impressive 5-year guarantee it's going to win over a lot of consumers.

Other big-bag lightweight standouts included Eagle Creek's new Hovercraft H2O, backed by its standard-setting No Matter What warranty, and Antler's impressive 88-liter Size Zero bag, which creeps in just under the 8-pound mark.

Hard Up, Ready to Roll

Last year, we flagged four-wheelers as an emerging trend, and it's definitely one that's gathered some serious steam for 2009.

There are some significant selling

benefits for four-wheelers — you take up less footprint when you're wheeling an upright four-wheeler along at your side, and because it's right where you can see it you're far less likely to be that joker who's accidentally running over a fellow passenger's foot as you maneuver through a crowded terminal. Four-wheelers are much, much easier to thread down aircraft aisles and onto packed elevators. And they're just plain easier on you, physically, since you're not having to carry any of the load with your arm — you're just there to steer and guide, with the weight borne by those four swiveling wheels.

Levels of commitment to the four-wheel trend vary. Some manufacturers offer them on some bags, while others, like Swany, are completely committed to the idea. Given the fact that four-wheels were de rigeur for brand-new lines from makers like Rimowa, Hartmann and Heys USA (who debuted a number of quad-spinner bags), we're predicting four-wheelers are going to become the dominant format in the very near future. (Two-wheel holdouts will be carry-on size or smaller, or big bags that are absolutely pushing the limits of lightweight construction.)

Hardsides — which hit The Show like a tidal wave two years ago — continue to be strong players, in bags and cases of all sizes. Polycarbonate is still incredibly popular — it's shiny, holds up to scuffs, scrapes and impacts, and has enough inherent rigidity to provide plenty of strength without much of a frame or other reinforcement.

One hardside trend we pegged last year, and gained considerable momentum this year, was textured hardsides. Last year's crop of hardsides were almost universally shiny, with glossy finish, but there were a few textured hardsides and this year there are more.

Textured exteriors add subtle visual

appeal without the jarring effect of contrasting colors, and they can be cheap to do since they don't require any extra manufacturing steps — just change the mold. Texturing may also provide a bit of a long-term appearance advantage, since indented surfaces aren't as likely to become scuffed and scraped.

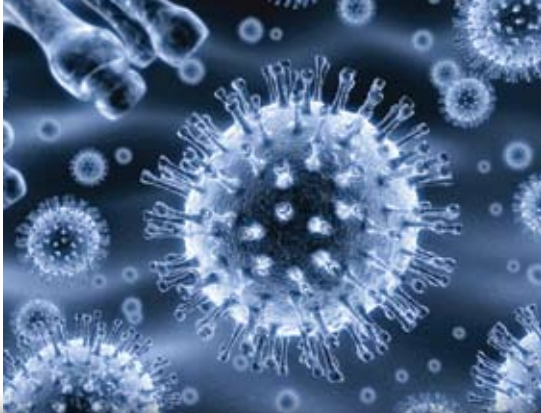
Rimowa's signature ribbed hard-side construction is arguably the first textured hardside, and dates back to the 1930s. It's been emulated by quite a few manufacturers, including Heys USA, for its new P²Drive hardside.

Heys USA's EcoCase also featured a textured exterior, with a small diamond fishnet pattern and big indentations and curves. And Olivet International's alternating raised and indented six-panel design adds visual interest, and rescues the Revo Connect series from monochromatic blandness. A scratch-resistant coating helps keep things looking good miles down the road.

When it comes to sturdiness and protection, it's tough to beat a hardside. But hardsides are unyielding when it comes to being packed into odd-shaped spaces like the typical car trunk, and they're not as light as soft luggage. Which might explain why hybrid hardsides continue to grow in popularity.

While there seems to be some agreement that hard/soft hybrids are a good idea — dozens of examples littered The Show floor — there doesn't seem to be any real consensus on which parts of a bag ought to be hard, and which should be soft.

ZERO Halliburton brought out its Z-Flex hybrid collection featuring polycarbonate shells and ballistic front panels. It's a definite high-tech look, and while it's a different appearance for ZERO, there's no mistaking that trademark profile for anything else. J World Sport adopted a similar strategy for its 33" Drop Bottom Wheeled Duffel, with



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a molded ABS plastic bottom mated to a conventional, multi-pocketed duffel top. Heys jumped on board with its FuseX1, pairing 1682d ballistic nylon with a polycarbonate body.

Olivet International's Jeep Trailhawk series is a hardside hybrid of a different stripe, with hard molded side panels that buttress the soft, expandable fabric panels. It's a unique look, with a rugged appearance that dovetails neatly with Jeep's rugged off-road image.

ZERO's Z-Flex polycarbonate collection also features expandable models that use soft accordion-like bellows to increase interior volume when needed. It's not technically a hybrid, but it's not a pure hardside either.

Wear It, Love It

If there was a can't-miss trend at this year's Show, it had to be apparel. It's a potential growth area for the travel goods industry, one with such huge potential this year's Show featured an Apparel Pavilion for the first time ever, with an even dozen exhibitors participating.

A model store area showed off different retail display strategies, from slotwall merchandising to island displays that integrated luggage, accessories and outerwear.

The big thing with retailers was discovering that getting into the apparel business does not require a full-blown commitment to building a dressing room and a billion SKUs. Granted, you need those things if you want to sell fitted outerwear, but a savvy retailer can sell wash-and-wear travel underwear and socks — compression socks and hiking socks in particular — with a small selection of hats and build a good business out of it. Chuck Weisbart tested travel underwear in his store

a few years ago, and it's now one of his best-selling items. In a roundtable discussion Ricky Schlesinger of Eagle Creek related a story about a friend who introduced apparel into her San Diego store as part of a three-year transition into the segment, and apparel now accounts for 20 percent of her business "and did not eat into luggage sales."

ExOfficio showed off travel underwear and outerwear. UbU's jackets — which hit The Show with a splash — continue to do amazingly well. Zip-It Gear's pocketed socks, Tilley hats and other apparel add-ons received a lot of retailer attention at The Show.

Going Green is Still Hot

Last year's umbrella trend continues to build momentum, although there was less excitement expressed for eco-friendly renewables this year. Consumers are still very environmentally conscious — more so than ever — but the economy has taken some wind out of the green sails. Any new technology is always expensive at the beginning, and while last year's consumers were more than willing to absorb the additional cost of buying environmentally sound products, the current economic picture makes them more price-sensitive than before.

That said, doing good by the environment is still a legitimate trend, and judging by record sales for hybrid vehicles last year, among other things, it's only becoming more popular.

GreenSmart continues to be the poster child for green commitment within the travel goods community. In its first year of operation, the company saved more than half a million PET bottles from the landfill with its recycled

fabrics, and you can track its progress on the website for a running tally of bottles saved, BTUs saved by reusing existing materials over virgin materials, and equivalent power in laptop computing hours (555,169 bottles, 369 million BTUs and 4.3 million hours, as of this writing).

The company showed off its new Ultralight and Commuter Briefs, which weigh in under a pound each (and adhere to another big trend this year — light weight), and can accommodate 17" laptops. And at The Show company president Tom Larsen was very excited by the possibilities presented by a new foam, which promised to further reduce the environmental cost of GreenSmart's products by reducing the use of volatile organic compounds with low-impact adhesives.

AmeriBags Earth Collection of recycled bags, made from CyclePET, reinvents the signature shape of the Healthy Back Bag in a recycled material. The Earth Collection debuted with four bags in the lineup — two totes, a small field bag and a Healthy Back Bag tote. CyclePET is made from 100% recycled materials, and the company reports receiving a tremendous amount of interest from customers, press and retailers alike.

Heys USA must have had its product developers working overtime, because the company debuted a mind boggling array of new products, including its EcoCase. Heys claims the EcoCase is the only hardside available with 100% recycled packing shells, made from what's claimed to be a new blend of ABS plastic that gives the shells the elasticity to resist cracking. So it's not only environmentally responsible, but a possible improvement over existing hardside.

PB Travel continued to push its Eco-Leather products, which use regen-



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erated leather, a composite of leather scrap, natural latex and other materials. It's a glossy leather that makes for an eye-catching luggage tag, among other things. And PB Travel enjoyed very strong sales of its bamboo throws last year, highlighting the ongoing popularity of eco-friendly fabrics for durable goods.

Computing: Checkpoint-Friendly and Very Small

Traveling with a computer and other electronics is the rule, rather than the exception. And because computers are changing faster than any other consumer good, we're not surprised to see a lot of change when it comes to how travelers take their computers along.

Last year the TSA began allowing computers to go through x-ray without being removed from their cases, provided that case met certain requirements that allow for an unobstructed view of the computer in the machine. More than 40 companies responded with new designs, or modifications of existing product, and the result has been shorter queues at security, and fewer laptops left behind in those plastic bins.

So while this is not a new trend, per se, this year's Show was the first time you could see all these bags on display.

A lot of checkpoint friendly bags employ a strategy like Aerovation Products, with a clamshell panel that holds the laptop. When you get to security, just swing the clamshell out so it lies flat on the x-ray belt next to the rest of the case. When it emerges from

the other side, just grab the case by the handle and go, computer clamshell and all.

The vast majority of laptop sleeves actually conform to the checkpoint friendly guidelines, which call for a clear x-ray view of the laptop unimpeded by zippers, pockets and other image-cluttering distractions. Case Logic and Sumdex brought dozens of sleeves that fit the bill, and they weren't alone. However, many of the sleeves we saw on The Show floor weren't marked as checkpoint friendly. Travel-savvy consumers can tell which are checkpoint friendly, but our guess is most consumers aren't going to take the chance — so if you haven't tagged your checkpoint friendly items as checkpoint friendly, you're missing out.

Briggs & Riley covered all their bases when it came to a checkpoint friendly strategy — its @work and verb lines incorporated a mix of swingout clamshells and removable sleeves, building them into everything from business briefs to carry-on rollers. And Korchmar came armed with checkpoint friendly briefs for the high-end set, with externally accessible computer slots and removable laptop sleeves for speedy passage through x-ray.

In computing circles, netbooks are being touted as the next big thing. They're sub-miniature computers that emphasize portability over computing power, the idea being to provide full-function access to the Internet through WiFi or 3G cellphone networks that trumps the limited functionality of iPhones. With screens measuring 10" or less, and prices that dip below the \$300 mark they're definitely making a dent in traditional laptop sales. It's a different path from the more power, bigger screen mentality that's guided laptop evolution up until now, and because these tiny computers are designed for

portability, it's the perfect trend for us.

Dimo Gear/WalletBe came with snug, form-fitting Neoprene Computer Pouch Sleeves that adhere to this smaller-is-better esthetic. They're thoughtfully designed, with an inner lip that helps prevent you from accidentally tipping your netbook out onto the floor while unzipping the sleeve.

Case Logic — which made its name with carry cases for portable electronics — came with a busload of miniature cases and sleeves. We're sure it won't be long before we see stealthy computer cases built around these diminutive machines, which would be a logical extension of the laptop bag-disguised-as-purse trend we've been tracking for the past couple of years.

Playing it Safe

Security continues to be a big traveler hot button, and a strong Show trend. Heys grabbed the spotlight with its second-place showing in the Product Innovation Awards for its BioCase that uses fingerprint scanning technology for its locking mechanism. And PacSafe's booth was almost perpetually busy, as retailers flocked to see their new line of Toursafe bags — pedestrian-looking bags that incorporate their usual slash-proof, pilfer-resistant features — and new camera and laptop carriers.

Personal security continues to gain momentum as travelers become more trip-savvy. There's a growing awareness that you can personally make travel a safer experience, and this represents a huge opportunity for the travel goods industry.

Traveler's Supply is a good example, taking third place in the Product Innovation Awards with its TravelER USB thumb drive. Users can store

their medical history and emergency contact info on the drive, which can be immediately accessed by anyone with a USB-equipped computer — no Internet connection required — and your medical stats can be output in a print-friendly form. The clever drive also has an encrypted partition that allows you to store pdf scans of passports, social security numbers and other vital-but-sensitive information. It's a lot of peace of mind for a \$29.95 add-on.

Money belts are always good sellers, but a challenging sell to fashionistas, which is why Conceal Wear's money pouch garnered some retailer attention on the floor. Unlike more conventional neck pouches, Conceal Wear's packet attaches to a shirt hem and is designed to ride below the beltline. Retailers expressed some concern over how comfortable it might be, but they were talking about it, which must mean something!

RFID — radio frequency identification — continues to gain traction as an information resource. And continues to grow as a security threat as more and more passports, driver's licenses, credit cards and other sensitive documents start to incorporate the technology. Kena Kai was an early adopter for this trend, taking second place in last year's Product Innovation Awards with its DataSafe Travel Wallets that shield documents from RFID's contactless scanning abilities.

As RFID technology filters into credit cards and driver's licenses, there's more opportunity to sell accessories built around this perceived threat. Stewart/Stand's stainless steel mesh wallets and billfolds garnered a lot of attention, not only for their unique art-industrial look, but for their RFID-shielding abilities as well — and they weren't alone.

Luggage loss continues to be a source for travel anxiety, and luggage identification has been a strong add-on item for years. "Tude Tags, Accessory Sports and U Tag It were all talked-about items on The Show floor, as retailers sought out unique ways for their customers to separate their bags from the rest of the herd in baggage claim. Colored baggage straps and colorful add-ons like Pomchies (which have just been picked up for distribution by L.C. Industries) continue to drive add-on sales, and garner interest.

Travel hygiene is still a strong product segment. It seems that any sort of germ barrier is a good thing when it comes to sales. Airline seat covers continue to move briskly, and at this year's Show they were joined by items like Travel Feet Disposable Foot Covers from Terry Lane Products, and the Kangopack.

It's hard to say what's more appealing about Kangopack — the fact that it's a germ barrier for your belongings as they ride through x-ray in a plastic bin (which just held someone else's shoes), or the way it makes it virtually impossible to leave belongings behind as you dash through security. This clever accessory unfolds into a 20" x 15" x 5" bin liner, which separates your stuff from directly contacting those plastic checkpoint bins with an antimicrobial fabric barrier. Once through security just grab it by the handles, and it becomes a tote with your valuables secured within. At least this way you won't have to pay attention when the airport PA drones, "Would So-and-So please return to airport security to pick up your wallet and keys..."

Colorize, Accessorize

Luggage continues to get more colorful, although this year's Show wasn't as brightly colorized as it was in 2007 or 2008. We didn't see as many wild, out-there shades, although color is still a strong feature (and selling well, if our baggage carousel straw poll is any indicator).

Basic black doesn't appear to be quite so basic. A lot of collections are shying away from straight black for a base color. There were lots of grays — charcoal in particular — and some browns.

Prints continue to be strong, with animal prints really making an impact. Last year we spotted giraffes, zebras, and even cattle joining the perennially fashionable leopard and cheetah spots on luggage. This year the menagerie didn't seem to have grown — but it didn't shrink, either, which says this trend is at least holding steady.

The clothing industry has been very hip on metallics this year, and we saw a

bit of that when it came to accessories. MyWalit showed off its Metallic collection, and there were splashes of metallic silver and gold sprinkled throughout a lot of accessory displays, particularly with leather goods. Heys had its zCase metallic polycarbonate luggage, but seemed to be alone in the metallic luggage arena, at least for now.

Accessories in general were a hot item, with retailers anxious and eager to find those small, gotta-have-'em items. Witness humangear's GoToobs, which won the Buzz Award as the most talked-about item in the New Products Pavilion. These clever tubelets encapsulate toiletries and other liquids or gels with food-grade silicone, stand up on their caps so they're easy to dispense, and the larger ones cleverly incorporate a suction cup so you don't go chasing your shampoo around in the shower.

First-time exhibitor Rowallan of Scotland was another talked-about exhibitor, with a line of colorful, fun accessories like its Carla Manicure Set/Grooming Kit, which struck a chord with its colorful playfulness and friendly price.

In accessories, it seemed like \$30 was a magic number of sorts, when it came to retailers and their willingness to try new products. If you could bring something in for under \$30 MSRP, and it served a purpose, there was retailer interest as they sought to shore up sagging luggage sales with more add-ons.

The Only Place to Be

Spotting an interesting new item or two is easy. Finding a few items worth carrying is difficult. But to identify trends and get enough of a global overview to know where the industry is heading, there's only one place to be — The Travel Goods Show. Make plans to be there next year, and see what's in store for 2010 and beyond. ■

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www.thetravelgoodsshow.org