

Upbeat, Lighter, Greener

By Garrett Lai



It's a big show, and there really is a lot to see. Between juggling appointments, catching seminars and just plain catching up with industry friends, seeing the whole of The Travel Goods Show is pretty much impossible. Which is why it helps to borrow the eyes and ears of a few industry retailers to get their read on what's happening in our industry.

Trends

THE BIGGEST TREND FOR THE 2010 Travel Goods Show was attitude. Walking the floor, listening to retailers, attendees kept saying over and over how positive it felt. People were writing orders, and things were moving. "I thought the upbeat attitude was much improved over the year before. That was the first thing I was looking for at this year's Show, and I found it," declares David McLean, owner of McLean Luggage in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, who's been in the luggage busi-

ness nearly 30 years.

Accessories have definitely come of age — we saw more than 70 exhibitors this year with significant portions of their product lines devoted to accessories, and some, like Design Go and L.C. Industries, are exclusively accessories purveyors. Luggage will always be an inseparable part of the travel goods landscape, but in terms of items offered for sale, accessories may have eclipsed luggage offerings, or are about to.

Jeff Izenson, owner of Specialty Luggage in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has “maybe been to 26 Shows,” having been born to a family in the business, and has spent 25 years working in the industry full time. “My impression was there were more accessory people this year, which I thought was a good thing.”

Minnesota, had to agree about the color, although that’s not necessarily a positive. “I noticed huge amounts of color, which is painful for me because I can only sell black,” she says, explaining that her family-owned business caters primarily to flight crews, and for them black is the only color allowed on the job.

“Everything is changing in the luggage industry,” says Usha Ramchandani, owner of Luggage World and Travel in Miami, Florida, who’s been in the industry 15 years. “Everything is going from two wheels to spinners to lightweight. People don’t want to get big sizes [of luggage] any more, like before. The industry is more into accessories, which do well, especially when you add it on with the luggage. People like the locks and tags, and everything is TSA.

the lightweight issue,” he says. “But all the products have improved by giving customers better value. I look at what Antler brought to The Show this year versus last year, the New Size Zero is remarkably better, it just feels much more substantial. The old Size Zero sold well for us, it’s so light it shocks people. But they replaced some of the vinyl aspects of it with nylon, and improved the colors with a deeper bronze color on the one that’s not black (and black was awfully good). They made the case for the same price, but it looks like it has more value, it’s more refined and improved,” Wein says. “Travelpro made some big steps in improving their products. The new Crew 8 was outstanding, I feel like they’ve really righted their ship, and are doing a lot of things that will really help them.”

Continues Wein, “One of the things about going to The Show is you go to a booth, and you revisit something that a year ago you thought wasn’t so great, and then you change your mind. I did that with Atlantic Compass this year. Before The Show my whole mindset on Atlantic and Travelpro [which owns Atlantic] in general was their quality was a little bit off. But I think they’ve proved to me they’re committed to quality. I got to meet the people from the company, and it confirms their commitment to what they’re doing. So now they’re a key vendor for us,” Wein says.

“Another company I think is really on top of things is Delsey. It’s a remarkable company with all the things they do, with the different angles they approach things with — like light weight and security. They have a new case, and you can’t puncture the zipper. Most cases, you can puncture the zipper with a ballpoint pen and get inside, you won’t be able to do that with this case,” says Wein.

Gregg Simon, president of Portland Luggage in Portland, Oregon, has been attending The Travel Goods Show since he was seven, but started attending in a professional capacity 29 years ago. “I noticed a couple of interesting trends. I like the fact that there are environmentally conscious products now. I think that’s a nice thing to offer our customers, especially in the Northwest because people here are very environmentally

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And light weight, which has been a design factor since the invention of the suitcase, continues to be a powerful trend. Fueled by airline overweight baggage fees and customer demand, and probably helped along by our aging demographic and the simple fact that better, stronger materials are available, lightweight luggage just keeps getting lighter and better. “We’re still seeing weight reduction from a lot of people, that’s a big part of The Show,” Izenson observes.

“Lighter luggage is happening a lot,” says Gillian “Gill” Green, buyer for Luggage & Leather Depot in Atlanta, Georgia, who’s a 12-Show veteran. “There were a lot more travel accessories, there are more choices for customers. We’re definitely trending toward more good stuff at lower price points.”

Color continues to be a powerful eye-catcher on The Show floor, although black is still the color that’s ordered most. “I saw color again, and by color I mean eye-popping color,” says Izenson, “which I think is good.”

Jennifer Malmberg, buyer/manager of Stop-Over Store in St. Paul,

The luggage scales are phenomenal, people like colorful luggage, not plain black. Polycarbonate luggage is doing better than soft-sides, which used to be the most popular for us but people are getting into more polycarbonate.”

One big trend Ramchandani noted is the trend toward shopping again, and with it, a deeper trend toward value. “People are spending more money on luggage. Before, they didn’t spend that much, but now they realize the more they spend the more they get for their money — better quality, it lasts longer, and you get a better warranty,” says Ramchandani. “People travel, and as bad as the economy could be, they don’t stop traveling. Everybody is still traveling, they still need luggage, and they want to invest in something that will last. Things are definitely changing for the better.”

The industry, as a whole, seems to be paring weight and adding value at the same time. At least that’s how it looks to 31-year industry vet Philip Wein, an owner of Irv’s Luggage in the Chicago suburb of Mount Prospect, Illinois. “Lots of manufacturers have addressed

conscious. It would be nice if some of the majors began to pay a little bit of attention to that, what kind of eyes they're using, how the leather's being processed, the number of chemicals being used in things. Then again, I've got friends who live in areas of the country where nobody cares. But the younger generations are more aware, it's part of who they are, and they're paying attention to this. So I think the majors would be wise to pay attention to that, that's the future."

Simon also agrees that value and quality are ascendant. "Some companies are really doing their best to maintain quality, and I was happy to see that. I think Johnston & Murphy's doing a terrific job of this, I love their stuff. They make great luggage, it's unique, they keep the price clean and it's very high quality."

New Lines, New Products

FOR A LOT OF RETAILERS, THE Show is an opportunity to discover new product lines, new product categories, and a chance to, well, shop for new items for their shop. You can't beat The Travel Goods Show for business-building opportunities, and this year that proved to be very much the case.

"After The Show we brought in umbrellas from Vista, out of New Jersey, just for fun, and we're now going back for our third order on some of this stuff," enthused David McLean in Edmonton, just weeks after returning from Las Vegas. "We've never had umbrellas and walking canes in our store before, it's been absolutely incredible. We got these walking sticks that have a palm grip, it fits in your palm, we've never seen one like this, and they're from Vista, like the umbrellas. We have a senior's hospital just opposite us on the street, and we keep getting calls for these walking canes. If you have arthritis you can't grip things very easily, and because these are shaped and molded for the hand they're fabulous," says McLean. "We also picked up a new product category, ladies' reversible travel coats. We've got windbreakers, knee-length, beautiful coats, they're fashion-

able — absolutely terrific, from UBU."

Sanjay Bhalla, manager of Manhattan's Eastside Luggage Shop and a nine-year industry veteran, made his fifth trip to The Travel Goods Show and came home to give Bric's a try as a new vendor in his shop. "We're trying out their Life Collection and the casual line of handbags. So far it's been little response, but business is slow. We're moving in a positive direction, no question, but right now it is tough."

Ramchandani says, "We ordered some of the self-weighting luggage from Intelligent Luggage. It's great — the scale's on the bag, so you just put your stuff in it and weigh it. It sits on the ground and weighs itself, automatically showing you the weight of the luggage. We ordered some Eagle Creek, because their accessories are doing well, lots of people ask me about them. We added Eagle Creek duffels in small, medium, large and extra large. We ordered the hiking backpacks, and we ordered all the accessories, the ones that come on the rack with Pack-It® Cubes, Pack-It® Folders and Mobile Locker, Compression Sacs, ID pouch, all of it. And we added a vacuum space saver type of thing, those are something I think will sell well."

Izenson brought in some new items and vendors after his trip to The Show. "We bought into Eagle Creek's Hovercraft line. It's very light, and it's well made. And we're also looking at new vendors like Ed Hardy — that could be an interesting thing. It's very hip and topical," says Izenson.

"Briggs and Riley's new BRX looks very cool as well, it has a unique look, and they really seemed to do their research. You never know until it checks out, but it seemed functional. And Heys had the Hummer series, which we spent a lot of time with [Izenson is on the NLDA luggage committee]. It's a real mixed bag of opinion. I liked it, although I'm a little uncertain it would continue to mean anything after they shut Hummer down, but it's a pretty unique product."

One new item Izenson's trying out is GoGirl, a small personal accessory that allows women to urinate standing up. "We're selling it, not as fast as we hear other people are doing, but we are selling it. When you're going to a third world country, or a hockey game — I don't know what they do in there, but I

know in the men's room it's disgusting — it seems like the thing to have."

GoGirl also made the tryout list for Gill Green. "There were so many new travel accessory distributors, they tend to blur after awhile. But there are definitely a lot of new ideas, like the ladies' products, we're trying a bathroom product called GoGirl. I like the blowup bag that protects your wine [VinniBag]."

Malberg's Stop-Over Store is also giving VinniBag a tryout. "I think they just did such a great job, and it's multi-use. But I knew there was a need, I know with my customers [principally flight crews], they do purchase so much wine." Malberg also put a toe in the water with Antler's New Size Zero. "It's lightweight, and has a 10-year guarantee. Plus the fact that the construction incorporated carbon fiber, which we've been kind of curious about. We do so much luggage repair here, it just seemed like a natural progression to go with carbon fiber to combat the weight while maintaining durability. It's really amazing — the frame is like coat hanger wire — we're giving it a whirl. I have a flight attendant demoing it right now to see how it does."

Antler's New Size Zero also made an impression with Simon and Portland Luggage. "They're a company that has made a strong showing at The Show for the last few years, and to my knowledge they weren't getting that much action. But they were still buying the big booth, and they really came into play with their programs this year — they're getting in everywhere."

Portland Luggage also brought in a couple of new exhibitors after seeing them at The Show. "We brought in Spibelts and Lipault. Everybody liked Lipault — they're fashionable, lightweight, well-priced, and tell a story."

Crystal Ball

THERE'S NO FOOLPROOF METHOD for determining what lies ahead, but The Travel Goods Show continues to be the best prognosticator for determining the hot product categories, brands and businesses for the coming year.

Collectively, our informal survey of retailer impressions definitely points the way to a more energized, upbeat future. And that's good news indeed. ■