

What's Hip, What's Current, What's Coming

By Garrett Lai

In business, as in travel, it pays to look ahead. And while there's often no way to tell what might be waiting around the corner while trekking through the romantic, remote parts of the world, you can get a reasonable glimpse of what's coming down the product pipeline from walking the aisles of The Travel Goods Show.

Accessories Go Big

IF THERE'S ONE BIG TREND FOR The 2010 Travel Goods Show, it's accessories. *A lot of them.* More than 70 of the exhibitors at this year's Show were dedicated accessories vendors. They ranged from small, just-launched one-product companies like Ellessco and its pneumatically padded VinniBag (which swept the Buzz Award voting tally), to big outfits like L.C. Industries (Lewis & Clark) and the UK's Design Go.

Accessories are an increasingly important part of the overall travel goods picture, and this is a trend that's definitely here to stay. Accessories are becoming a key relationship-builder for retailers, a great way to create repeat business, which is increasingly important as luggage durability continues to improve.

The thing accessories bring to the table is problem-solving. Travel is inconvenient by nature. Travel accessories do a lot to mitigate this. Delayed at the air-

port? Whip out My Travel Table, attach it to your rolling luggage and you've got a desk you can work on. No free pillows on the plane? Use your Cabeau memory foam pillow, or one from Cocoon by Design Salt or one of pb Travel's luxuriously soft organic ones instead. Bored on the plane? Slide your iPhone or iPod Touch into a Seat Buddy and you've got a personal theater. Not enough room to pack for that week-long dream vacation? Reduce luggage bulk with wash-and-wear travel undergarments. Tired of squinting at your book poolside? Try Cross' new Sun Readers. Not sure if you'll be hit by an airline overweight fee? Consult your luggage scale.

There are as many different kinds of travel accessories as there are travel problems, but one growing category is comfort. The airlines continue to take comfort away — or more precisely, they'll only continue to provide items like meals, blankets and pillows for a fee — so now we're seeing more comfort-driven accessories.

These are just examples, but smart retailers are leveraging accessories as

add-on items and reasons to bring customers back to the store. Which just makes good business sense.

Light Weight

IT'S A TREND THAT'S HERE TO STAY, and only getting stronger. And no wonder, seeing as how it's being pushed from all sides: Airline enforcement of overweight charges is helping drive consumer demand. Consumers — driven in part by an increasingly aging demo-



graphic — want luggage that's easier to tote and travel with. "Consumers were behind the curve as far as lightweight is concerned, but now they're getting hip to it," says Eagle Creek's Ricky Schlesinger. And manufacturers are pushing the lightweight angle as a marketing advantage, with weight now joining price as one of the few hard-and-fast metrics consumers can readily understand and quantify.

Retailers are demanding this as well, judging by the interest garnered by items like Antler's incredibly light New Size Zero, a sub-7.3 lb. 30-inch case, and the buzz surrounding Travelpro's Atlantic Ultra Light Collection and Delsey's Helium SuperLite line. The fact that RIMOWA's Salsa Air took first place in the Product Innovation Awards only underscores the continued importance of lightweight construction when it comes to luggage.

Colors and Patterns

LAST YEAR WE REPORTED ON A preponderance of bright colors as we walked The Show floor, and there were even more blooms of color in the aisles this year. The colors are almost cartoon-like in their intensity, with decidedly spring visual flavors predominating. Accessories like luggage tags, handbags and totes are definitely more likely to see these colors, which by our unscientific count leaned toward sky/baby blues, Barbie doll-like pinks, tangerine oranges and lime greens, which we spied in booths by Greensmart, BJX, Belle Hop, pb Travel, KIVA Designs and Sherpani. Loud, almost eye-popping reds were popular as well, and couldn't be missed in the product lineups

from Bric's, Revo, Wenger/SwissGear, BelArno, Lodis and Tucano.

The color trend did extend into luggage as well; Luggage America/Olympia, Heys and Wenger/SwissGear were among those who went big in colors for larger pieces.

Repeating patterns were strong on luggage this year, although solids are still dominant. Polka dots are the classic repeating pattern, and while strong last year they're even stronger this year. But houndstooth — which has seen a big resurgence in clothing over the past two years — has surpassed the plain round dot for geometric repetition. The classic black-and-white houndstooth pattern sported by Heys rollers, among others — originally a textile weave pattern — is now a graphic element that can be blown up so that familiar, irregular diamond shape can be as big as your hand. And it's been co-opted with alternate colors, freshened up by the likes of High Sierra's AT GO in purple, with Olivet's Jessica Simpson line showcasing a most unusual gray/green variation.

We also saw a lot of familiar shapes repurposed as repeat patterns. Classic paisley is strong, and so are swirling quasi-paisley designs. Landor & Hawa showed one piece with a repeating pattern of cats, Heys turned Disney's Tinkerbell and trademark Mickey Mouse silhouette into repeating geometrics, and some designers like Amy Butler for Kalencom combined repeating patterns with the previously mentioned bright color palette to eye-catching effect.

Animal prints are still hip, but this trend seems to be on the ebb from a couple of years ago, when walking The Show floor felt almost like visiting the city zoo. Leopard, crocodile and alligator will always be with us, but the cow pattern of a year ago seems to have

been put out to pasture. There were a few giraffe prints spotted here and there, and zebra's still showing some legs, but the animal-inspired patterns seem to have been supplanted by geometrics.

Pop Culture/Licensing

TATTOO ART HAS GONE MAINSTREAM, and has been for a few years. So, it's no surprise that travel goods are starting to get hip to this art form, with Kenlo International's Ed Hardy-licensed umbrellas being one obvious example. Another was CalPak's tattoo-inspired "True Love" pattern. And Guess Travel showed more than a few beautifully drawn graphic treatments that were definitely reminiscent of skin art, handily showcasing the tattoo graphics trend as well as the increased interest in licensed brands.

Licensing has always been big, and it's been successful, as witnessed by SwissGear's ruggedly refined travelware reminiscent of Wenger's famous red pocketknives. But this year saw the emergence of more licensed brands than we've seen in awhile.

Guess Travel is one such example of a manufacturer using pop culture to leverage brand awareness and sales. "We've done Guess handbags for 17 years," says sales manager Terry Thomas for Signal Products, which licenses the famous designer jeans brand. "We're new to the luggage business, but we've done duffels and cosmetic bags before," says Thomas. "These are fashion trend items that spin off our handbag designs, and they're mainly targeting women 25-55 who want a fashion bag." With Guess advertising images of recogniz-



ably famous, beautiful people like Drew Barrymore, Claudia Schiffer and the like, Guess Travel's luggage line basically comes with a pre-made marketing image.

The big difference with this new crop of licensed brands is how they're no longer just fashion-oriented brands, but culturally relevant ones. Planet Earth hopes to turn an award-winning BBC miniseries (and its 100 million viewers and 75% U.S. brand awareness penetration) into an eco-themed luggage line. Disney by Heys rolled out a busload of luggage festooned with licensed Disney imagery (including an eye-catching child's roller with Disney princesses complete with flashing LED lighting). Hummer-branded luggage occupied its own booth. Accessory Network featured Susan G. Komen luggage promoting breast cancer awareness (some of which featured the trademark crossed pink ribbon in a repeating pattern, a trend remarked on earlier). Hobie Sports drew on its active sports history with a miniature replica of Hobie Alter's original surf shop — the country's very first dedicated surf shop.

It's a logical move, one that helps keep existing product current and topical. And it's an attention-getter, one that stands on the shoulders of already extant marketing images. It's smart marketing, and we're betting you can count on seeing more brand tie-ins of this nature at future Travel Goods Shows.

Textured Hardsides

THIS ISN'T NEW, BUT WE'RE SEEING many more textured hardsides as the current generation of hardsides have become commonplace and manufac-

urers start looking for ways to build product differentiation. RIMOWA is the obvious standout here, with its signature ribbed hardside shells that date back to the 1930s. But while RIMOWA's trademark corrugated look was originally created for strength, to bolster the structure of its aluminum cases, it continues today as a signature look. And that's pretty much how others are employing texture in their hardsides.

Jenni Chan showed hardsides with a raised pattern resembling a monochromatic plaid. Antler and FAB/Starpoint's Sharper Image brand both had pink textured hardsides (two trends there, hot pink and texture), CalPak displayed textured plaid and dimpled hardsides. Hummer's hardsides were blocky, square and boldly textured, like the namesake vehicles. Travel Concepts also had orange and pink textured hardsides with repeating textures embossed into them, which are a trifecta of three trends — texture, repeating patterns and those bright spring-like colors.

4 is Better Than 2

FOUR-WHEELERS HAVE BASICALLY supplanted the two-wheel bag, as travelers have become wise to the advantages inherent in four-wheeling — the bag's weight is entirely self-supporting, putting no weight on the trolley handle; and with four swiveling wheels you can roll your bag down the aisle the narrow way without having it snag on armrests (or other travelers' elbows). Even ultralightweights like RIMOWA's Salsa Air, which pare weight down to the bare minimum, will employ four wheels in spite of their extra heft.

Checkpoint-Friendly is Hip, Square is Square

CHECKPOINT-FRIENDLY LAPTOP bags were a brand new product category just over a year ago. Now checkpoint friendly has become a big decision-making standard for almost all computer bags, and an almost de facto requirement for laptop carriers that are travel oriented (as opposed to everyday business briefs).

And while most of last year's checkpoint-friendly cases were just your basic padded rectangles, a quick walk-through of this year's Show floor showed not only a swath of colorful alternatives, but some rather stylishly shaped offerings as well, such as Travelon's Quick Pass Computer Briefcase with its stylishly rounded corners and almost handbag-like profile. And that touches on another trend — the decline of the square bag. Bags defined by right angles and crisply defined edges appear to be an anti-trend, at least with everyday bags, where non-rectilinear shapes and silhouettes are starting to dominate.

More Green, Less Greenwash

ECO-DRIVEN INNOVATION CONTINUES to gain momentum, and it's happening on two fronts: Materials and design. We're seeing more and more eco-friendly textiles coming available,



with a lot of PVC-free luggage and recycled PET fabric. But we're also seeing smarter designs that actually make do with less material — consume less material for reduced impact, and consume less fuel transporting those items to market. The extreme example is still GreenSmart, which totally reinvented itself two years ago (it was formerly Shoreline) and has now expanded from computer sleeves and cases into casual bags, messengers and packs with heavy use of recycled materials and reduced environmental impact.

GreenSmart is far from alone, being joined by Ecogear's PVC-free/toxic-free items and major players like Olivet putting a lot of horsepower into sustainability.

Eco-centric goods have always been a grassroots movement, but with the proliferation of online forums and social media, sustainability has become a genuine marketing force with real momentum. Just Google "eco-friendly luggage" and you'll not only find millions of pages devoted to low-impact goods, but hundreds of thousands of consumer posts and web pages discussing the environmental merits of those goods. It's how brands like Make Love Not Trash can be both culturally hip and environmentally conscious. This trend is only going to grow, and it's almost inevitable that it becomes standard business practice in the decades to come.

Adventure Gets Hip

THE OUTDOORS HAS SUDDENLY become hip, and for a lot of reasons. The popularity of shows like "The Amazing Race" and "Survivor"

certainly hasn't hurt. There's a growing sense of environmental awareness among the general populace, and an urge to get in touch with the planet that's made eco-tourism into a distinct, growing travel segment. And camping has enjoyed a tremendous surge in popularity worldwide, fueled in part by better gear that takes the edge off of roughing it, and also driven by its low-cost appeal at a time when families are still pinching pennies.

Companies like Eagle Creek, Athalon and High Sierra have always had adventure travel hardwired into their DNA, but we're seeing more mainstream companies putting a toe into the water. Briggs & Riley's new BRX line represents major commitment to this category, but we're also seeing the growth of new product segments like wheeled backpacks into mainstream stores, which were exclusively offered by outdoors shops just a couple of years ago.

Soft/Hard Hybrids

IT'S NOT A NEW PRODUCT CATEGORY, but it's definitely picking up momentum as designers look for ways to provide more value and durability while still keeping weight to a minimum. ZERO Halliburton showed some hardside/softside hybrid cases two years ago; Athalon has featured hard-bottom duffels in its product line for some time, and showed a new Molded Wheeling Carry-On with Detachable Duffel (see our 4-color product showcase this issue). There are a lot of advantages to this, as a hard bottom provides a rigid structure for a wheeled chassis, and also provides toughness

on the bottom, which should do away with wear like frayed corners and torn-up bottoms.

New exhibitor Boblebee's signature backpack — first conceived in 1996 and produced in 1997 — features a hardshell exterior with a soft structure for the side that goes against the wearer's back, which the company has long touted provides the best combination of protection (for wearer and the bag's contents) and comfort. And we're seeing a similar approach in the design of hard-bottom duffels like High Sierra's 32-inch Drop-Bottom Wheeled Duffel, with a "molded foot" that helps the bag stand upright and facilitates easier lifting.

Guess Travel featured a couple such hybrids in its fashion-centric luggage lineup, which says this trend has appeal that extends beyond the purely practical aspects.

Refinement Rules

IN THE BIG PICTURE, WHAT WE'RE seeing is building on successful formulae, without anyone wasting resources reinventing the wheel or taking big risks with new product categories. If these trends have a theme it's one of refinement, as manufacturers continue to build momentum with core products and mainstream categories.

"This was a year for evolution, not revolution," says retailer Chuck Weisbart of It's...In the Bag!, a longtime industry observer and insider. But given the incredibly positive buzz from The Show floor, and the infectiously positive energy exhibited by retailers and exhibitors alike, this seems like a plan that works. ■

