

Politics and Apparel Go Hand in Hand

by Robert McAllister, Technology Editor

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It's an election year, and once again, apparel makers are taking advantage of the campaign to show off the latest political fashion and make statements on everything from the candidates to the environment.

Whether their intention is to make a profit or take a stance on an issue, this season's offerings are bold, graphic and eye-catching.

Designer Jennifer Ashley of Santa Monica, Calif.-based **Hippie Ink** is catering to the contemporary woman with a series of "Vote" tops decorated with stones and crystals on camis, tanks, and burnout and thermal tees. The messages include "Every Vote Counts" and "Vote Peace USA."

The line wholesales on average for \$36 and is available through the **Sharon Koshet Sales** showroom in the **California Market Center** in Los Angeles.

"This is an important election. People have to vote. We don't want to see what happened in Florida during the Gore/Bush election [in 2000]," Ashley said.

Sales for the collection have been strong, the designer said, adding that interest peaked just before the recent Democratic National Convention in Denver.

Ashley and others noted that the window of opportunity is limited on campaign wear. Many companies donate portions of sales to charities and causes.

Cerritos, Calif.-based **Revolve Clothing**, which just opened a new Melrose Avenue store in Hollywood, is selling a series of "Rock the Vote" tees aimed at getting out the youth vote. **Rock the Vote** is a nonprofit organization that prompts America's younger generation to vote and become active in causes that are important to them.

Los Angeles-based **Lucky Brand Jeans** has hooked up with MTV's "Choose or Lose" effort, which is the rock network's **Emmy Award**-winning campaign to engage young voters on the issues that matter to them most. Launched in 1992, the campaign has helped fuel large youth-voter turnouts, such as in 2004 when nearly 22 million people aged 18 to 30 voted. In 2008, "Choose or Lose" will elevate the issues of the men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, while encouraging young people to vote in their honor.

Lucky is selling a series of \$40 "Choose or Lose"-themed T-shirts through its Web site and retail stores. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this product will be donated by MTV to the **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**. For more information, visit www.chooseorlose.com.

The environment, too

Ventura, Calif.-based **Patagonia** is staying true to its roots and has embarked on a "Vote the Environment" campaign, which, through the sales of shirts and hats, is urging its customers to research the environmental records and stances of each candidate and vote accordingly. The company launched a Web site, www.votetheenvironment.org, as well as other promotional point-of-sale materials. Proceeds from the sales are donated to the **League of Conservation Voters**. Sales started off lukewarm, probably due to interest in the Olympics, but have taken off after the games, a company spokesperson

said.

Company President Casey Sheahan said the campaign is a bit risky because not all of Patagonia's customers are environmentalists. "We believe deeply that the environment is the foundation we all stand on. Every other major social concern, from energy to foreign policy, hinges on the health of the planet," he said in a statement.

Other brands, such as Santa Ana, Calif.-based **Obey**, are taking a more whimsical approach. Company founder and artist Shepard Fairey designed several Barack Obama "WPA"-themed shirts featuring Obama's image with the word "Progress." The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established in 1935 to provide jobs for people during the Depression.

The shirts have been on sale at **Urban Outfitters** and other specialty stores. Fairey has also issued a limited-edition "Empower Yourself" print for Rock the Vote, which is being sold through **Café Press** (www.cafepress.com).

"I wanted to make art for Rock the Vote because I feel that many young people need to be reminded that voting is a direct and powerful way to express their opinions and shape policy. Rock the Vote reaches out to younger voters who often have progressive views but fail to turn up at the polls. I wanted to do anything I could to help Rock the Vote encourage a powerful group of potential voters to participate in democracy," said Fairey in a statement announcing the project.

Retailers are also getting involved. **Gap Inc.** also has a "Vote" initiative. The San Francisco retailer has teamed with musician Matt White (one of *Rolling Stone's* "10 Artists to Watch"), who is participating in several in-store events in Los Angeles; San Francisco; Orlando, Fla.; and other locations where iconic white Gap T-shirts are given away.

The shirts have a message that reads "Vote For _____," leaving it up to voters to fill in the blank.

The shirt can be seen in White's "Love" video and will be for sale in Gap stores Oct. 23 through Election Day, Nov. 4.

Political fashion and other related merchandise currently make up the top-selling category on Café Press, which is a 100 percent user-generated e-commerce site. Most of the merchandise being sold is candidate-related. The company is tracking sales, and Obama has, thus far, accounted for 57 percent of sales, followed by Hillary Clinton with 15 percent and John McCain with 7 percent, company spokesperson Marc Cowlin said.

"I think all this shows a renewed interest in politics," he said.

When the campaigns are over, political merchandise should account for about 20 percent of the company's sales for the period. The private company does not disclose sales.

Even menswear designer Andrew Christian is jumping on the political bandwagon. He has designed an "Obama '08" boxer for men and will soon be showcasing "Obama '08" camis and fly shorts for women.