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## Dreams of grandeur

Wal-Mart attempts high fashion at low prices

BY M.B. PELL  
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At the entrance to the Wal-Mart on Stadium Boulevard stands an elderly greeter in a blue vest and a flannel shirt. He says hello, asks a young mother with three screaming children if she needs help and sizes up a youngish-looking man, perhaps to assess the likelihood of his stealing anything. A bin beyond the old man is filled with waxy red apples on one side and white onions on the other. Nearby cash registers beep and ping and rattle. Directly ahead, before customers reach the discount bulk cleaning supplies and the rows of inexpensive, microwave-quick meals, rising above the frenzied crowd are several pictures of smiling, well-manicured, inviting young women advertising the store's new higher-end apparel collection — George M.E.

Wal-Mart, the consumer king of cheap, is no longer satisfied selling inexpensive detergents, contact lenses and toys. Last spring at a meeting of its top executives, the company announced it wants to lure in more discriminating shoppers while retaining those customers economically tied to bargain buys. Columbia provides an ideal example of why Wal-Mart changed tactics. Retailers such as Kohl's — which has a store on the Grindstone Parkway only a few hundred yards from a future Supercenter — and Target are making a killing selling somewhat fashionable clothing at somewhat affordable prices. Wal-Mart wants in on that action. But the question remains: Will consumers buy a suede jacket or a cute pair of embroidered jeans from the world's largest retailer?

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VOGUE

The advertisements on this page, published in the September issue of *Vogue*, showcase Wal-Mart's attempt at the chic side of cheap with the designer line George M.E. The line's most expensive item, a beaded coat, sells for \$88.82.

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The women in the Wal-Mart advertisements (think gleaming peroxide-white teeth set against rosy-dawn colored lips) look professional and successful, though not mature enough to have reached peak pay potential. These are the women Wal-Mart wants to woo, women who already buy shampoo and batteries from the retail leviathan but breeze by the apparel section with a barely concealed grimace. To prove this point, ask a woman if she stocks her wardrobe with Wal-Mart steals. Go ahead. She'll probably respond with an icy stare, if not a stabbing high heel to the foot.

Changing this kind of prejudice is not easy. Wal-Mart is making an effort by participating in New York Fashion Week and buying eight full pages of advertising in *Vogue* magazine. That's right, *Vogue* magazine, the publication once referred to by the legendary and classically stylish writer Gay Talese as "the supreme symbol of sophistication for every American female."

Scattered among glossy pages of a rail-thin model feeding a diamond the size of a pigeon's egg to a pony and an impossibly perfect naked woman lying on white fur are pictures of Wal-Mart women, almost all jumping with glee in reaction to the deal they got on the neutral-stripped woven blouse, \$13.82, the herringbone vest, \$17.82, and the ruffled-front cardigan, \$19.82. In the November issue of *Vogue*, Wal-Mart uses a sultry brunette dripping with diamonds to hawk an elegant jersey-knit cocktail dress from another of its new lines, Metro 7 (\$16.94, available in three colors).

The clothes, like the pintucked dobby blouse with crocheted trim and back darts for \$16, are part of the George M.E. collection. The George comes from George Davies, a designer better known in Europe, who was bought up by Wal-Mart in 1999 along with Asda, a British grocery and apparel chain he worked for.

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Sandy Stover, a teacher and a single mother who lives in Columbia, spent the weekend before Thanksgiving cruising Wal-Mart's wood-floored clothing section with her curly-haired little boy sitting in the cart. She mostly shopped for candy canes and other Christmas decorations, but she needed clothes for work, something more professional than jeans and a blouse. She appreciates George M.E., and she's loyal to the store.

"This is the season I'm not supposed to be buying for myself," Stover says, eyeing the smiling boy who is waiting for Santa Claus. "I still need to look businesslike and fashion-forward. I can get a few classic pieces of clothing that I can change out and mix and not spend a fortune on a single outfit." She says she has received compliments on the George clothing, and it didn't fall apart after a few washes so she started buying other Wal-Mart clothing, such as a black and white flower-patterned acrylic sweater by Faded Glory, \$16.42.

But in the marketing agencies of Chicago and New York, not everyone is convinced of Wal-Mart's fashion viability. Rudy Magnani is president and founder of Magnani Continuum Marketing, Chicago, a branding firm that spins out advertising campaigns for retailer High Sierra Sport Co., Motorola, and hotel chain Marriott International. Magnani says changing Wal-Mart's brand image from cheap to chic is a difficult trick to turn.

The retailer has a stigma that suggests rural and simple rather than urban and sophisticated. For that reason, shoppers don't place the same dollar value on Wal-Mart products that they might on apparel from other retailers.

"Wal-Mart would have to create an infrastructure of buyers with a new sensibility of fashion," Magnani says early one Saturday morning before a meeting with a client. "I don't know if they could do it at sustainable prices."

Still, the dream is not dead. Magnani says an economic recession could prod fashionable young people toward taking Wal-Mart more seriously. And because fashion is not a rational pursuit and is driven by youth consumers, this could cause a sizable portion of the herd to start purchasing black tank tops and then blouses and jackets from the local Supercenter.

"Even boomers will follow the fashion of what 20-year-old women are doing," Magnani says. "A 45-year-old businesswoman wants to buy relevant, hip clothing and not be treated like an older woman."

But why would it take a national economic slump to allow Wal-Mart to fit into the mid-ranges of the fashion world when Target, another retail giant that sells mass-produced foreign-made clothing, is already known for selling stylish, hip apparel?

Colleen Abrie, an image consultant in California often cited by media sources for her fashion advice, is the perfect person to ask because her business is taking successful geeks and making them look good. She says the reason Target has had success and Wal-Mart hasn't lies in the different designers used by each. Target hired Isaac Mizrahi, a designer already proven on the runways of New York, Paris and Milan. His couture — handmade super-high-end-runway clothing — made him a glamour expert. Plus, the bubbly designer is a celebrity; he starred in the 1995 documentary *Unzipped* and makes frequent television appearances. He regularly critiques the ensembles of movie stars during awards shows — his most memorable commentary concluded with Mizrahi hefting Scarlett Johansson's ample bosom at the Golden Globe Awards earlier this year.

"He's really someone we'll still be talking about in 50 years," Abrie says in her cool California accent. "But he's a pretty savvy dude. He's not just a designer and a celebrity. People criticized him when he first agreed to design for Target, but now he's laughing all the way to the bank."

She says Mizrahi has designed clothing in a variety of lines to fit just about any woman between the ages of 18 and 60. He offers a "butterfly" collection of bright colors alongside a herringbone collection of classic professional attire. Every season shoppers can return to the line that worked for them last year, confident they can pick up at least a few pieces they like.

For example, this year Mizrahi took the design of a timeless black skirt and added seaming and piping along the edges to lend detail, and now Target is selling a taffeta ebony skirt for \$27.99. With dozens of different styles, his lines have a wide appeal.

And the clothes are marketed with accessories, making it easy for time-starved customers who work, attend classes, or take care of a family to match purses, belts and scarves with their outfits. Abrie says that for a woman, it's like shopping with a gay friend. There's a video of Mizrahi on the Target Web site. He speaks casually as if he were on a shopping trip with the girls. He advises them to buy a black dress modeled after a trench coat or a ribbon and bow print skirt with a jacket that, according to Mizrahi, "makes you feel like you're in complete heaven." Beyond accessories, Target has lines of Isaac Mizrahi dishware, furniture and linens that reinforce the name brand.

Abrie says Mizrahi, through his manic personality and stylish vernacular such as "couture" and "dahling," makes consumers think Target clothing is hip, happening and hot. Telling consumers what's cool is the job of the fashion world, whether it's at a pricey little boutique on Columbia's Broadway or a chain retailer on Stadium Boulevard. Abrie uses handbags to illustrate how style compels shoppers. She says every woman wants a designer handbag — a Coach or a Prada — and "she'll slut herself

out" to get that bag.

"She will do whatever she has to do to get herself that handbag because it automatically elevates your status, and for a woman a handbag is a signature piece," Abrie says.

Target works the high-fashion angle, giving women fantastic pieces that look like couture but at affordable prices. Isaac Mizrahi is the pitchman who makes it work, which brings us back to Wal-Mart and its as-yet-to-be-fully accepted George collection. It seems like a similar formula, but Abrie explains that it isn't.

"This could work for Wal-Mart, but never as well as Target because, honestly, who the f\*\*k is George Davies?" she asks. "I've never heard of him."

Lauren Solomon, an East Coast image and media consultant, says she knows Davies because she worked for a consulting firm that worked on marketing campaigns in Europe. She likes the George M.E. line; in fact, she recently bought a camisole from Wal-Mart for \$10. Solomon says the difference in designers is less significant than the difference in the focus and marketing approach of each retailer. She describes Mizrahi as washed up in 1998 after Chanel SA, a Parisian fashion house, pulled the plug on his wild line of runway clothing. Then in 2002 it was Target's reputation for quality and affordability and the company's commitment to marketing that led to the success of his line.

Whereas Target ensures its displays frame the clothing as chic and classy, Solomon says Wal-Mart at first failed to do the same.

As Abrie would say, you're the largest single employer in the United States, you have 176 million customers a week, so dress the part. Some of the Wal-Mart stores in Columbia appear dingy. Worn linoleum floors and bare-steel displays advertise the clothing only as cheaply utilitarian. Consumers can find 30 purple blouses bunched together like a cerebral blood clot waiting to burst.

But Solomon says Wal-Mart is changing its display approach. She says that during her trip to Wal-Mart, items from the George M.E. line were front and center and not thrown on racks, but layered neatly so customers could get an eyeful before rummaging through them to look for the correct size.

In Columbia, the new Supercenter with the brick façade on West Broadway is a perfect example of how Wal-Mart is trying to class up its image. The light-colored wood planks beneath the apparel section make the cavernous store's interior feel more like the cozy confines of Gap.

Solomon says she likes the Davies line, but she complains it doesn't have enough sizes, colors or anything other than basic pieces. Plus, she says, the camisole, like many of the other pieces in Wal-Mart, will probably only survive a couple of runs through the washing machine. It's still made of cheap material, which is why customers can buy a short-waisted lavender jacket for \$19 or a tank with frilly edging over the bust for \$12.82 or, on the high end of cheap, a suede jacket for \$69.82.

Despite the advertising blitz, Solomon doubts Wal-Mart will steal many customers from Gucci or Prada. She says the woman shopping at Target will finish her shopping at Neiman Marcus, while the Wal-Mart customer is usually done when she walks out. Solomon says that as she shopped in Wal-Mart, the other customers in the clothing department looked like they belonged there.

"Wal-Mart has built themselves as a hearth and home place, and they're not changing from that," Solomon says. "I don't think they're so foolish as to believe the George line is going to bring them a new audience."

But C. Britt Beemer, chairman and founder of America's Research Group, a Charleston, S.C., company that polls thousands of American homes more than once a month on Wal-Mart design issues, says the mega-retailer has to make an effort to grab more upscale shoppers. He agrees with Solomon, however, in that he doesn't think Wal-Mart has succeeded yet, even with advertisements in Vogue. "I think it's had some impact, but I don't think consumers have fallen in love with anything," he says. "I don't think at this point they've gotten the right look yet."

Beemer says Wal-Mart has a few chances to reinvent itself as hip. After that the company has to give up before it looks like it's trying too hard for a makeover, which is something American consumers won't stand for. A number of newspapers, magazines and industry executives have attempted to predict or gauge the success of Wal-Mart's change in fashion direction, but the truth is nobody knows how it's going to work out.

Critics of the move point to low sales growth in Wal-Mart stores open for more than a year. Proponents argue that the retailer still increased net sales by about 12 percent for the 2006 fiscal year and celebrated the opening of 36 stores across 26 states in October alone, so the company has time to develop brand loyalty.

Fashion is a crazy bitch goddess, and what's popular today is embarrassing tomorrow before it's hip again. Face it: Even the most optimistic marketer says it's going to take a national economic freefall to get women to start saying, "Yeah, thanks, the whole outfit is George Davies M.E.; I got it at Wal-Mart. Hell of a deal, too."

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