

# Cheapskate Chic - changing fashion business

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What are the rich and fashionable wearing this season? Try Sears shoes, Wal-Mart pants and Target sweaters. Suddenly it's chic to pair Karan with Kmart - and to boast about it.

New York designer Todd Oldham has outfitted Susan Sarandon and Julia Roberts in couture dresses that cost \$5,000 a pop. But when he dresses himself, Oldham sometimes can get by on pocket change.

One of his favorite sweaters, a plushy gray wool, comes from the boys' department at Old Navy. Its price: \$10.50. As for his jeans, Oldham professes to like plain-pocketed Rustlers worn by fast-moving rollerbladers in Manhattan. So he heads downtown, where they're \$10, and right across from the plastic lawn chairs.

Oldham is a Kmart shopper. These days, the people who can get away with wearing what-  
ever they want are wanting some very low-rent duds. Call it Cheapskate Chic; it's now and it's changing the fashion business. Cutting-edge clotheshorses are pairing pricey designer clai-

sies from Calvin, Donna or Prada with things discovered in fashion's underground: no-name clothes that cost as little as \$10 to \$15, at full price, from mass merchants.

**Sears paired with Lauren**  
Among the fashionable set, Sears, Roebuck & Co. is getting a good rep for its designer knock-off shoes. Socialite Blaine Trump wears by the denim shorts at Kmart. Old Navy is a big hit for unisex retro-1950s clothes, and perhaps the favorite store of trendsetters everywhere is Target, where the \$7 polo shirts actually ranked higher in workmanship and durability than \$49 ones from Ralph Lauren in a 1997 Consumer Reports magazine test.

How did it happen that it has become acceptable, even savvy, for the well-to-do to sport cotton sweaters and pants that cost less than a new key ring for the Mercedes? It all started with budget-conscious young fashion-industry insiders - junior fashion magazine editors and stylists - who discovered that mass merchants were beginning to turn out more fashionable goods and began

mixing them with designer pieces. They then boasted of their budget finds to wealthy friends and clients who were already starting to spend much more money on their homes and children and less on their own clothes.

Elizabeth Saltzman, style editor for Vanity Fair magazine, and a dresser who mixes her Pradas with J. Crew, got compliments for the flowered \$17 sun dresses she used to pick up at the now-closed Caldor's in Bridgehampton, Long Island. As word spread, she says, she started running into "all the trendy girls from Manhattan looking for stuff at Caldor's."

## Target bragging rights

Back in the 1980s, says Tom Burns, a senior vice president with retail consultants Dodge Group in New York, "women bragged about getting Calvin Kleins and Donna Karan at discount at Loehmann's. But now they're saying they are going to Target, which says, 'I'm one up on you.'"

Bragging about buying budget has become possible because of big advances in manufacturing

and marketing in the \$180 billion a year apparel market. Budget-clothing manufacturers can now copy the style, cut and color of designer clothes in the same season, instead of a year or two later. Then they market the clothes just as department stores do, and standardize sizes so well that shoppers don't have to try them on. The bottom line, it is a lucrative one, is that stores such as Target are giving consumers real clothes at disposable prices.

Manhattan socialite Blaine Trump was at Kmart loading up on the Martha Stewart brand of sheets and towels for her country house when she spotted the budget store's Route 66 line of leisure wear. She bought "those great denim shorts that I have in a selection of colors that I wear in the garden. They go for something ridiculous like \$9.99, and they look as good as the designer ones," she says. A Kmart connoisseur, Trump knows where to look: "The Kmart in Florida have a better selection in colors," she notes.

## Award show attire

And Camryn Manheim, an

actress from the ABC television drama "The Practice," crowed to Good Housekeeping magazine that she picked up her Emmy award last year in a couture Emanuel dress - and Payless shoes. The fake diamond earring studs she often wears are from Target. She calls it "a celebration of bucking the system."

Similarly, Diane Clehane, an entertainment writer for TV Guide, happened to be in Sears in Long Island, N.Y., where her parents live, when she spotted leather pumps and some sexy high-heeled satin evening shoes. Marked down to \$39.99, but complete with a black beaded buckle, they "looked like Versace," she says. Combining the racks at Sears, she found nine other pairs of pumps at about \$39 each - all for less than the total price that she spends on one pair of the Manolo Blahnik spike heels (priced from \$350 to \$500) that fill her closet.

Standing on the red carpet at the Academy Awards this year, Clehane wore her Sears satins. "Tom Hanks' wife, Rita Wilson, walked over and told me she loved my shoes," Clehane says. Part of the thrill for aficionados

■ 'The denim shorts go for \$9.99 and look as good as the designer ones.'

Blaine Trump  
—New York socialite

dos is customizing their bargains to make them look expensive. Oldham makes the pile on his Old Navy sweater thick and plush by washing it in hot water and drying on the "high" setting. Cheapskate chic is a worrisome trend for the Calvin Kleins of the world who make most of their profits on jeans and casual clothes - the very items in which mass merchants specialize. Earlier in the decade, designers were blindsided by the rapid growth and upscale march of stores such as Gap and its Banana Republic unit, which now have nearly as much cachet as the designer brands.

In 1998, mass merchants such as Target, Wal-Mart and Kmart accounted for 43 percent of all apparel sold, up from 38 percent five years earlier. That trend appears to be continuing.

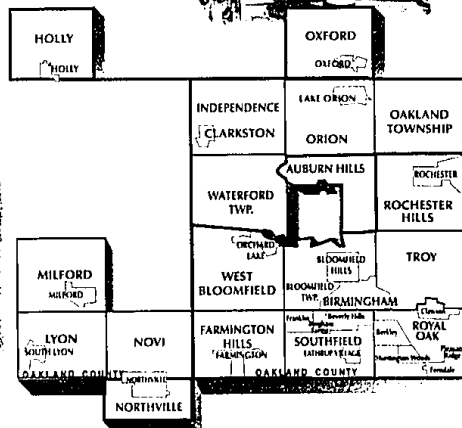
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