



Courtesy of The Los Angeles Sock Market

Socks in the City

BY SHELLEY MOENCH-KELLY

Once upon a time, consumers could only find socks and hosiery in a spartan array of colors and styles. Merely practical in nature, legwear kept our feet and legs warm and dry, but did little else. Men had white tube socks for sport and black ribbed calf-length socks for dress; women had high-denier stockings and bulky satin garter belts with clumsy metal clasps that never quite supported the silken folds at their ankles. Fashion had no hold over function.

Fast forward to 2007, and it's a whole new world of socks and legwear. Men's socks now range from 10 shades of black to subtle patterns of houndstooth and chevron, while women's legwear includes thigh-high stockings, nude fishnet hose, toe socks, and toeless sandal hosiery. Retro is also back in town, with a return to silk dress socks and argyle crews for men, and sparkly, stretchy stockings with lacy garters for women.

Clearly, legwear is no longer being left to languish on the utilitarian back burner of fashion. Rather, it's time to accept hosiery as a viable, exciting component of apparel as we know it, holding an equal candle to shoes, purses, and jewelry. "Hosiery is definitely a fashion accessory," says **Marshal Cohen**, the **NPD Group's** chief industry analyst for the apparel, footwear, and accessory markets. "We're looking at textures, novelty, color, and silhouettes. Treat the product not just as a commodity, but as a novelty and accessory."

No matter what a store's legwear and hosiery selection looks like, however, there are always a few

great ways to make it "pop" on the shelf and appeal to customers.

Brick-and-Mortar Methods

The **Los Angeles Sock Market** is quite possibly the luckiest sock and hosiery retailer in the world. It's tucked in the vestiges of Universal City, Calif.'s famous Universal CityWalk, which is packed with tourists. As one might suspect, the steady flow of potential customers makes selling a bit easier. "The merchandise sells itself," says General Manager **Veronica Rothacher**. "We really don't have to advertise, because there are so many visitors who pass by on their way to a movie, show, or dinner. We just let the merchandise speak for itself. Everyone loves socks, and they're practical, affordable gifts."

Most retail locations, however, aren't fortunate enough to rely on the if-you-hang-it-they-will-come method. **Target**, for example, must make its hosiery look appealing to customers who didn't necessarily come to the store in search of those items. "Men's, women's, and children's socks are each in their sepa-

rate sections," notes **Letty Cruz**, team leader of Target in Van Nuys, Calif. "The racks have endcaps with small signs to notify customers of the seasonal items or sale items we feature. There's not much we can do to customize displays [due to a corporate formula], so we mix up the patterns and colors to keep things interesting."

Manufacturers like **Spanx** do what they can to make merchandising easy for retailers. The corporation distributes its goods to high-end stores, boutiques, and TV shopping channels. "For boutiques, we customize unique display fixtures to showcase our products," explains Spanx spokesperson **Misty Elliott**. "We analyze floor space as well as the boutique's decor and make sure the fixtures feature our branding. With department stores, it's more challenging because we have to work around their existing displays. We design all our packaging with very bright, eye-catching colors, and the hangers themselves are molded in different shapes. This is especially helpful in an environment where we can't customize the displays."