

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Fashion forward

Four local innovators are trying to slip out of the industry straitjacket with their bright ideas.

By Elizabeth Wellington

Inquirer Fashion Writer



Lauren Handel shows the CamiLeon heel in its high and low version. These shoes are made for walking — and for style.

Fashion is supposed to be about innovation and self-expression.

But that's often not true.

One reason is that designers are afraid that, if they design for everyone, they will offend their perceived core customers.

Another is that the ranks of high fashion include a very powerful minority who can keep designers out of influential stores. When it comes to the bottom line, their opinions are the ones that count.

Finally, we as consumers tend to gravitate toward familiarity; new silhouettes can jar our eyes. Too often, we rely on fashion editors and designers to tell us what we *should* do, and their suggestions have nothing to do with everyday practicality (why else do you think pointy shoes reigned so long?)

That's why it's nice when people in the fashion industry put their fear of failure aside and plow forward with genuinely innovative ideas. We've found four local examples, who have the potential to change the fashion world. While each is at a different success level, in a few years we could be as familiar with them as we are with Kate Spade or Spanx.

Two Kings Neckwear

Jordan Beilin, Josh Beilin, and Maureen "Moe" Sugarman

Two years ago, Jordan Beilin took a Sharpie and drew a melting tragedy-mask face on a silvery blue tie. When he wore the tie to a party hosted by MTV, colleagues, friends - even strangers - stopped him.

"They all wanted to know where I got the tie," Beilin said from his home office in Jenkintown.

"I decided then and there that I had to do something. I had to see if I could make this work."

Thirty thousand dollars later, 12 bins filled with brightly colored Italian silk ties sit in his office, underneath oil paintings of Elvis and Jimi Hendrix. The eye-catching ties are a risky marriage of art and the most staid item of men's clothing - the necktie.

He offers the melting face, as well as roaring lions, pensive angels and menacing skulls, set against a clean geometric pattern to create a 3-D effect. Each tie sells for \$85, and is packed in a velvet-lined pine box to attract high-end tie wearers - the least likely to wear a graphic T-shirt design on a tie.

"I think we overestimate how conservative people are," said Beilin, 23. "The tie has been so stale over the years. People just want something different."

The Beilin family is an artsy group. An oil painting by Jordan's grandfather, Wolf Sugarman, hangs in the dining room. His mother, Maureen, was heavily influenced by the psychedelic work of Peter Max, but her grandfather urged her to study math instead of art. Josh, also an artist and part-owner, is in school at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

Jordan spends his days on his marketing push - visiting men's boutiques, carting the wares to conventions. If the ties do well, he'd like to put his art on pocket squares and socks, too.

And if they don't do well, he and his mother know that they tried. "I just don't want them to have any regrets," said Sugarman, 49.

Two Kings Neckwear is available at www.twokingsneckwear.com.

Butler Bags

Jennifer Groover

The Butler bag is Jennifer Groover's under-your-nose solution for the so-everyday-we-don't-even-consider-it-a-problem bottomless purse.

The slightly oblong bag created by the Swarthmore mom is chic, with a short handle that can be clutched or slipped over the shoulder. Black, espresso and ivory shades give the matte leather a Prada feel on an Ann Taylor budget.

Looks aside, the true innovation is inside.

Within each Butler bag are a set of built-in rectangular compartments - perfect fits for iPods, BlackBerrys and cell phones, along with keys, pocket tissues and lip glosses. Have a baby in tow? Diapers and baby wipes fit in along the sides. (Novels or day planners, however, are a tight squeeze.)

The smaller, classic Butler has six compartments and retails for \$95. The larger version, which fits a laptop, has seven and costs \$150.

Groover, 34, a former physical fitness trainer, came up with the initial idea while unloading her dishwasher in November 2004. As she paused at the silverware tray, the "hmmm" light came on in her head and she placed the utensil holder inside her black Kate Spade bag. "Everything was standing upright and I had a birds-eye view of everything, even the smallest lip liner," Groover said.

Groover filed for a patent a month later. All in all, she's invested close to \$250,000 of her own money (although she's made good on that investment already).

Carolina Bermudez, a disc jockey for New York radio station Z100 spotted Groover's publicist with a bag in early 2006 and mentioned it the next day on her Rage Page. Groover received 500 orders that day.

Within the year, the Butler Bag made the Best Accessories of 2006 list compiled by the New York-based Accessories Magazine. The Butler Bag also was featured in O! Magazine in January.

She's sold close to 5,000 bags, and is on target to having a million-dollar company. But Groover is not stopping there: She's developed a jewelry-case holder named Bangles as well as a Butler Brag Book, Butler Barber (for men), and Butler Baby.

"It's like having your own little personal butler," she said.

Butler bags are available at www.butlerbag.com.

CamiLeon Heels

Lauren Handel and David Handel

Getting around town in stilettos is a decades-old problem. The pinching. The pain. Ouch!

In February, Ardmore resident Lauren Handel and her brother, David, introduced CamiLeon Heels - classic pumps, Mary Janes and spectators sporting 3-inch heels that can be folded down to a very walkable 1 1/2 inches.

You'd think such an invention, priced from \$260 to \$305, would be greeted with shouts of joy. But the shoes are off to a slow start because in the hot-to-trot fashion world, it's hard for comfortable wares to gain that chic cachet.

"It's so foreign," Lauren Handel said. "Even though women react well to them, they have no understanding of the technology. They have no experience with it."

So how do CamiLeon heels work?

The shoes are designed with stretch capacity so they can fit snugly around the foot in both the high- and low-heel positions, Handel said.

A stainless steel rod runs through the heel and is equipped with locking mechanisms that keep the heel firmly in place when it's high. When the wearer is ready to shorten the heel, the bottom is unlocked, folded in and stowed near the arch. A patent for the design is pending.

It sounds more complicated than it is: I went from high to low in three seconds flat.

Handel's brother, David, a New Jersey-based radiologist, came up with the idea in 1989. As he gazed out of a New York cab window, he watched women walking to work in sneakers, their high heels tucked in their bags. When he came home, he developed a shoe based on his son's Transformers toys.

"There just had to be a more attractive option," David said.

CamiLeon Heels are available at www.zappos.com and www.camiLeonheels.com.

Buzz Marketing

Tina Wells

At 27, Tina Wells sits at the helm of Buzz Marketing, a Voorhees-based company that banks several million a year by tracking teen fashion trends and reporting them to companies like Verizon Wireless and Sony BMG.

Wells uses the Internet and guerrilla marketing to commune with a network of 9,000 teens worldwide. They let her know if red is the hot color or if the skateboarder look is still in. That's fashion information that manufacturers are willing to pay big money for.

Two years ago, Wells was profiled in O! magazine, and Entrepreneur magazine named her one of its young influential business owners. She was even up for the job of editor at Seventeen.

It's a life that allows her to live large: In Crain's Business Report earlier this month, she admitted to spending more than \$1,000 a month on spa treatments and \$600 on Jimmy Choo stilettos.

Wells' online magazine is called the Buzz Report (www.buzzmg.com). Her magazine, Buzzed, is a free publication geared toward companies vying for youth dollars; about 800 companies subscribe.

"I'm really at the point in my career now where I feel that I . . . help shape youth culture," Wells said. "We get music and fashion six to nine months before it comes out."

Wells grew up in Erial, Camden County, the oldest of six children. Her dad is a minister and her mother owns Lighthouse Christian Bookstore in Clementon.

At 16, she started writing fashion reviews for the New Girl Times, a fashion trade magazine for teens. "I got 40 pairs of shoes a month," she said. "That was my payment."

She developed a business plan for a product research company at Hood Collge. She started taking on clients, charging them upward of \$1,000 to report on what students wanted.

Today her company is akin to Illinois-Teenage Research Unlimited and David Morrison's Twenty Something Inc., based in King of Prussia. Her offices are slick and student-friendly, right down to the blue carpet and heart-shaped couches.

Her days of being paid in shoes are long gone. Now she charges clients between \$30,000 and \$250,000 for her vision and interpretive look into the teen brain.

Next month, Wells will debut buzzspotter.com, an online community for teens. "I'm always trying to grow, be humble, try new things, so I can continue growing," she said.

Buzz Report, www.buzzmg.com.

Contact fashion writer Elizabeth Wellington at 215-854-2704. Read her recent work at <http://go.philly.com/elizabethwellington>.

Find this article at:

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/columnists/elizabeth_wellington/20070429_Fashion_forward.html