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## Seeking Value, Women Cast Closer Eye on Brands; WOMEN'S & MEN'S 10 TOP BRANDS TO WEAR

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The number of women who say it's becoming more important to them to wear specific fashion brands has almost doubled this year, a new poll has found.

This finding has come even as people are reconsidering the value of numerous products and services and are saying apparel is less of a priority to purchase than it was before the recession — sales slid about 3 percent in the 12 months ended Feb. 28.

Nearly one in five women are placing increased emphasis on wearing specific fashion names and logos — and American apparel labels like Ralph Lauren and J. Crew account for more than half of their favorites, according to the 2009 **Brand Keys** Fashion Brand Loyalty Index.

That's about twice the slice of women who found it more important to sport certain brand names and symbols a year ago, a sign that the consumer's long-running search for value has been "exacerbated" by the recession, said Robert Passikoff, president of marketing consultant **Brand Keys** Inc.

"There is no doubt in my mind the popularity of the Obamas around the world — and particularly Michelle Obama from a fashion perspective — is representing the most powerful emotions people feel about the U.S.," noted brand-image developer Marc Gobé. "This has a halo effect on American brands, in a major way."

"People are [becoming] a lot more assertive in expressing an opinion, so if a brand fits their values, they'd be proud to wear it," added Gobé, who is chief executive officer of Emotional Branding.

Despite the taste for American names, Chanel topped the **Brand Keys** list of 10 women's favorites. Apparel featuring the name of a woman's favorite sports team ranked second, followed by Ralph Lauren, J. Crew, Giorgio Armani and Donna Karan. The top 10 favorites were rounded out by four newcomers to the 2009 edition of the annual list: Liz Claiborne, Calvin Klein, Dolce & Gabbana and Levi's.

The brands were named in a poll of 3,750 women conducted in the first quarter of the year in the nine U.S. Census regions.

About six in 10 women are finding it less important to wear a particular brand of apparel, down from seven in 10 in 2008, based on the **Brand Keys** survey. This marks the second straight year in which women have said they care more about brand names, reversing a trend of several years in which their interest had been on the decline.

Three of the apparel brands favored in the **Brand Keys** survey also appear among the 10 best-selling women's apparel brands in the 12 months ended Feb. 28, according to The NPD Group: Polo/Ralph Lauren, Liz Claiborne and Calvin Klein. During this 12-month period, sales of women's apparel fell 2.8 percent to \$107.9 million from \$111.1 million a year earlier.

Value for many consumers has come to mean something that makes one brand of apparel stand out from another, as the marketplace has become glutted with similar goods in a wide range of prices and stores. Retailers are expected to develop more proprietary fashion brands with cash freed by brands removed from their rosters.

"There is going to be a [winnowing] of apparel brands," Passikoff predicted. "You don't need five Gaps, just like you don't need five Circuit Citys," he added, alluding to look-alike branded products and the "ubiquity of product quality."

A brand shakeout is also foreseen by Paco Underhill, managing director of consultant EnviroSell, who is forecasting a 30 percent decrease in retail square footage nationwide — and a decline in space available for various products. "I don't think we're even halfway through the process," Underhill said. "We're never going back to the way we were. You drive across the U.S. and you see Circuit Citys and Linens-N-Things sitting empty. Shopping is not the way to solve our [financial] problems.

"We cannot sustain an economy as dependent on consumer spending as it once was," said Underhill, who is anticipating there will be years ahead, rather than months, marked by "more careful spending along all economic classes."

The public's spending via retail channels accounts for about two-thirds of the Gross Domestic Product.

BRAND	BIGGEST APPEAL
1. Favorite sports team's licensed apparel	Men, Millennials, Gen-Xers, Baby Boomers
2. Ralph Lauren	Millennials
3. J. Crew	Women, Baby Boomers
4. Giorgio Armani	Gen-Xers
5. Levi's	Men
6. Chanel	Women
7. Nike	Men, Millennials
8. Dockers	Gen-Xers
9. Donna Karan	Baby Boomers
10. Tommy Hilfiger	Millennials

SOURCE: **BRAND KEYS** FASHION BRAND INDEX 2009; 3,750 WOMEN AND 3,750 MEN POLLED IN FIRST QUARTER OF 2009, IN NINE U.S. CENSUS REGIONS.

Penélope Cruz in vintage Chanel at the Goya Awards in Spain.

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