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As Seen on (M)TV

by Marisa Rindone | Nov 13 2008

Collegiate hoodies and graphic tees are leaving retailers with losses this year. But get an outfit placed on *The Hills*, and you just might have yourself a profit.



As seen on TV: The girls (and boys) of *Gossip Girl*.

Photograph by: Everett Collection

"Blair Waldorf," says 15-year-old Sam Phillips, a high school student from New York, during a pause in shopping at Forever 21 in Herald Square. She tilts her head back and reconsiders. "Maybe Lauren Conrad?" she says thoughtfully. Then, decisively: "No. It's Blair."

Her friend Michelle Abubo won't even bother answering the question of whose wardrobe she would steal

if she could own anyone's. "I'd say the exact same thing."

Abigail Lorick would be happy to hear it. Last year, Lorick hit what may be the jackpot of youth-based branding: ghost-designing for TV's most fashion-obsessed, feverishly followed new show. Blair Waldorf, one of the main characters on the CW's *Gossip Girl*, is endlessly outfitted in "Eleanor originals"—clothing designed by her fictional mother, but in reality, pieces from Lorick's recent collections.

Which means Lorick is so far riding out the downturn nicely. "People talk about the economy, but honestly, I haven't seen a problem with our sales yet. I haven't felt it at all. Everyone's really concerned about it, but it hasn't affected us yet," the 26-year-old notes, quietly knocking on wood in her Manhattan studio.

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A [recent survey](#) by Portfolio.com and CNBC predicted that in the coming weeks, shoppers will spend 7 percent less on holiday gifts than they did in 2007. Consumer confidence is at an all-time low;

The squeeze is trickling down to teens—who are reinventing their tastes.

Retail Darwinism

The decisions fashion buyers make now will determine whether stores survive.

Bawl Street

Luxury retailers' expensive new stores on Wall Street are now expensive empty stores.

Americans are closing their wallets as half of Wall Street closes its doors. Mayle dresses are morphing into mortgage payments. Standby [Gap Inc.](#) saw second-quarter sales drop by 5 percent year over year, and 15 new store openings were canceled. Teen retailer [Abercrombie & Fitch](#) reported that same-store sales dropped by 20 percent in October, while competitor [American Eagle](#) saw losses of a not-much-better 12 percent. On the higher end of the scale, [Saks Fifth Avenue](#) just last week announced the close of their tween specialty store, Club Libby Lu.

But a few brands, including Lorick's, are finding success that can be rather easily explained: As seen on TV.

Consider left-of-the-mainstream [Urban Outfitters](#), which saw second-quarter earnings for 2008 surge by 79 percent; gross profit increased by 43 percent. TV's artsier sidekicks, like *Gossip Girl*'s Brooklynite Vanessa and *The Hills*' Audrina Patridge, who serves as the token brunette and is often dressed in edgier clothes for her job at Epic Records, seem to favor the company, whose Anthropologie and Free People brands have also defied the downturn—sales rose by 7 percent and 10 percent, respectively.



"TV always influences trends," says an Urban Outfitters spokeswoman of the impact *Gossip Girl* and *The Hills* may be having on the company's business. "We have stylists who work closely with both shows." Partnerships with designers like Charlotte Ronson, big on the teen radar screen, no doubt help as well.

"You are talking about people who are more brand-literate than any generation in the history of humanity," says Dr. Robert Passikoff, president and C.E.O. of Brand Keys, a luxury-market research firm, of the average teenage consumer. "It's important to be associated with, for example, *Gossip Girl* and *The Hills*, because there is a fusing of brands and entertainment value. Kids can just download something. You're talking about 24-7, 365 consumer control."

And kids are talking about the clothing worn on last night's episode. Which helps explain why it's slightly chicer, less traditional garb that's currently turning a profit as the economy turns down.

Passikoff thinks these retailers have played it right, explaining that a brand or independent designer like Lorick "needs to find the various entertainment and media venue that reinforces the values that the brand has built. Not everyone does that. Someone who does? Virtually anyone who's advertising on *The Hills*."

Lorick talks about a scene in which the show's two main characters, Blair and Serena, reconcile their differences with a girls' afternoon out, donning matching dresses for an impromptu photo shoot on New York's Upper East Side. "After the show [in spring 2008] with those backless dresses, everyone wanted that dress, and the young girls wanted it. Sales have definitely hit that demographic."

Viewers can relate to the giddy adolescent relief of having your best friend back, sealing the scene in the audience's mind. But it's doubtful many could tell you what storefront the girls flounced past or the logo on their limo driver's coffee cup. Says Passikoff: "What you're seeing is really the opportunity for the brands to create a sense of resonating values and create an emotional bond between themselves and the target audience"—which simple product placement just can't achieve.

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