

Men's Retailers, Brands Team Up in Tough Times

By **JOCELYN ANDERSON**

NEW YORK — More high-end boutiques are banking on exclusive product to draw in the male consumer.

For spring '09, pairings have cropped up between Rockport Established 1971 and Bogeda in Boston; Jil Sander and Aloha Rag in New York; Grenson and Odin in New York; Generic Man and Bettina in Athens, Greece; YMC and April?? in Paris; and NDC and Alexander McQueen in London.

"These boutiques are desperately looking for a point of difference because the retail industry has suffered, probably the most [as a result of the economy]," said Patricia Pao, president of Pao Principle, a retail consultancy in New York.

Pao added that the benefits extend to both retailers and vendors. For a designer, distribution is guaranteed. And for a storeowner, increased traffic is all but assured. Also, markdowns are unnecessary because of the

lack of competition for the product.

Some retailers look to big names to create excitement. At Matches, the Editions program has partnered with Alexander McQueen on a wingtip and Belgian brand NDC on a boat shoe, among others. "There has been a shift in the demands of our clients, and we have responded accordingly by creating an ongoing outreach program," said Matches Director Tom Chapman. "Whether offering an exclusive product, or a unique experience, it's about going that extra mile without trying to patronize our fashion-literate clientele."

It's that changing attitude on the part of consumers that retailers and vendors are hoping to combat. With many shoppers looking for more promotions, stores are seeking out new approaches.

"[We benefit from] giving our clientele the message that we interact with the labels we are carrying and that we are not just retailing goods we are buying," said Meletis Koropoulos,



Generic Man's Savant style, sold in canvas and an exclusive colorway for Bettina in Greece.

buyer for Bettina. "We are participating in the creation of our merchandise energetically."

For vendors, such advantages outweigh the added costs for supplying a single store with small runs of product. At Odin, the release of two exclusive styles by Grenson — a canvas oxford and a leather chukka boot — coincided with the store adding a few other styles from the new Rushden range. "We were thinking, 'Who can we best pair with to give Grenson the boost in branding we need?'" said Katie Liu, owner of Black Dog 8 showroom, which distributes Grenson in the U.S. "Odin is the

best store to do that with because it has a very strong and clear image."

Smaller brands and newcomers look to collaborations to create buzz. "It's about continuing to build the brand and its identity and getting it known," said Brandon Day, of Generic Man, which provided an exclusive midnight-blue canvas and patent laceup to Bettina. "As these retailers are getting more comfortable with us, it creates more options for what we have already."

And though the economy still casts a large shadow over business, some see the possibility for renewed shopping enthusiasm through these partnerships.

"People want to be excited about something," said Eddy Chai, co-owner of Odin. "Downturns also can spark these great movements when great things are produced. It's a good opportunity because people don't want gloom and doom — they want something refreshing and optimistic." — **With contributions from Meghan Cass**