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## THE PRODIGY

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FALL FASHION:

# WHAT'S **HOT**, WHAT'S **NOT**

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A look at the most popular apparel trends of the year, and a wave goodbye to those fading into the background.

*By Andy Vantrease*

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**W**ith another fall season quickly approaching, industry suppliers are gearing up for a warehouse wardrobe change, carefully curating new silhouettes, color palettes and decoration offerings. It's clear the old theory of supply and demand has been reversed: Manufacturers now base their product supply on the ever-changing demands of their end-users, and they're expected to react very quickly, as trends can come and go in a matter of months due to social media and celebrity influence.

Customers are also getting more educated on the latest trends in retail, often citing specific lifestyle brands they'd like to mimic when they approach distributors with order inquiries. So what does this mean for promo? Well, you should always value the basics, of course, but it behooves you to capitalize on certain styles while they're popular. Here's a look at apparel trends that are gaining momentum, and others whose glory days are behind them.

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**Packable Outerwear**

Thanks to companies like Patagonia, The North Face, Marmot and other popular outdoor brands, outerwear has become a lucrative category in the promotional industry. More than ever,

people are dedicated to healthy lifestyles, prioritizing fresh air, exercise and adventure, which means they need the gear to match their activities. Consumers are also conscious of their impact on the environment, and many have embraced the minimalist movement and aim to keep only necessary clothes in their closets.

Given these conditions, packable outerwear has taken off, providing wearers the ability to own one garment for multiple occasions, and suppliers are filling the need. Vantage Apparel (asi/93390), for example, offers a water-resistant jacket that folds into a self-pouch, making it easy for the wearer to toss it into a backpack or purse when they're on the go.



Vantage Apparel carries this packable jacket (7163) in men's and women's silhouettes.

"We've had great success with our packable jackets because clients are looking for garments that fit their end-users' active lifestyles," says Lauren Cocco, director of merchandising at Vantage. "Think about the number of impressions your brand receives when the wearer has a multi-season jacket that's functional, light and compressible. It goes everywhere with them."

**Patches**

As a broad trend, vintage is still in style, but the ways in which we see that play out in retail and the promo industry has varied over the years. Reminiscent of old-school letterman jackets or edgy biker vests, patches are making a comeback. This fall, suppliers and decorators expect patches of all kinds to increase in popularity, and they're preparing to get creative.

"Patches are fun because they can be subtle or they can be the center of attention," says

Kathy Cheng, founder and president of Redwood Classics (asi/81627) in Toronto.

"I always thought it would be cool to honor a company's anniversary by decorating

with several generations and versions of the company's logo on different patches. I'm still waiting for that opportunity, but we've had a lot of clients leaning toward that old-fashioned, worn look that patch branding provides."

Other suppliers offer a modern take on patch decoration with laser etching on leather or felt, creating a tone-on-tone finish that provides a sleek, upscale look. When kept small in size, patches can give the garment just the right amount of brand recognition without going overboard. "Customers like the dimensional aspect of patches, and they work really well on fleece and outerwear pieces for subtle branding," says Cocco. "Many corporate clients are choosing patches to decorate employee or new hire gifts so the receiver can wear the jacket without feeling like a walking billboard."



Redwood Classics designed this patch decoration on a raglan ¾-sleeve T-shirt (W897) for subtle yet effective branding.



### Private Label

When it comes to the branding of blank goods themselves, the promotional apparel industry has undergone an evolution: From thick double tags to tearaway tags to no tags at all, manufacturers are changing their own branding to fulfill client requests. Without manufacturer tags on a shirt, a decorator can brand the inside yoke with the client's logo, making it appear as if the shirt is completely customized for the brand. Plus, this ensures there aren't any other logos competing for attention. This tactic is straight out of retail, and suppliers are seeing more clients adopt the idea in order to own that precious real estate on the garments they're putting into the market.

Redwood Classics, which designs and manufactures for lifestyle brands such as J. Crew, Roots Canada and Bonobos, is heavy into the private label scene, creating both single-branded tags and co-branded tags, especially for Canadian customers who recognize the Redwood brand as a high-quality name.

"We believe private labeling is an integral part of the branding and merchandising process," says Cheng. "It creates a cohesive, consistent narrative for the client and adds value in order for them to resell it in their marketplace."

From a distributor's standpoint, private labeling prevents the customer from shopping around and competing on price, since it's harder to find the exact garment without a factory tag. "In an industry where people can find a lot of the same products, it's not so much what we sell but what we do to differentiate ourselves and our clients," says Mark Corscadden, national sales director at Dei Rossi Marketing (asi/178198) in McKinney, TX. "Forward-thinking distributors are going the private label route much more than they used to."



Redwood Classics specializes in private label for customers who want to fully own their brand.



### Burnout

It's never surprising when fabric that's notoriously difficult to



## "Nineties-inspired clothing is definitely back in our markets with schools and spiritwear."

Shelley Foland, Boxercraft

decorate ends up falling off the trend list. Because the promotional industry is built on branding and messaging, fabrics that don't take well to design techniques can't survive in the core product line. To that end, the industry has watched as the hype surrounding burnout garments has, well, burned out.

"A few years ago, so many of our customers were asking for burnout shirts and tanks for schools, booster clubs and other forms of spirit wear," says Corscadden. "They were a bit of a nightmare to decorate, but we made it work while the fad lasted. I hardly ever hear about it anymore, and I can't say I'm too upset about it."

Burnout, a technique used to break down the fibers of the garment until they're transparent, posed a real challenge for screen printers because the ink would seep through the chemically treated areas. Most embroiderers avoided the fabrics all together. Perhaps we'll see a comeback, but in the meantime, decorators rejoice.



### Tactile Fabrics

With the rise of categories like athleisure and lifestyle sportswear, it's apparent people are becoming more aware of the materials and textiles used to construct their apparel. Customers walk into a clothing store, and they run their fingers over the fabrics, pick up and try on garments, and walk around the aisles to test stretch and comfort. People shop by the feeling of the fabrics much more than they used to – and suppliers are taking notice.

Materials like Sherpa, tri-blend and ringspun cotton provide an ultra-soft hand and decorators are using washes and water-based inks to soften print before the final product reaches the customer. "This evolution began with T-shirts, and we're not seeing as many thick, rough tees as giveaways anymore," says Shelley Foland, CEO of Georgia-based supplier Boxercraft (asi/41325). "Our new Cuddle Soft line is a blend of rayon, polyester and elastane. It breathes like Hacci fabric, which is popular in lounge wear, and the goal is that the wearer can be super-comfortable all day while also looking fashionable."

Apparel makers are also finding success with fabrics like slub or mélange, whose aesthetic characteristics draw customers in and entice them to touch the garment. Companies are allowing employees to wear branded lifestyle apparel to the office because it adds to the feeling of comfort, encouraging workers to stay longer and create a life at work. "You think of tech companies with big campus environments that house everything the employee needs," says Cheng. "If you're spending that much time somewhere, you want to feel at home, and the company can curate good sweats that are more refined and nicely branded, so it's a total lifestyle adoption."



**Restrictive Apparel**

As clothing becomes more directed toward serving the wearer, restrictive silhouettes and fabrics are phasing out. Casual Friday is now casual Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – you get the point – which means people don’t want to be limited in their activities because of their wardrobes.

“Our most popular pieces have one or more performance features: moisture wicking, stretch, breathability, antimicrobial,” says Foland. “We want customers to live their lives in this apparel, and life is messy. If apparel doesn’t allow you to complete your daily activities with ease and comfort, why wear it?”

Restrictive, fitted silhouettes are being replaced by versatile cuts; thick, heavy fabrics are being upgraded to light, breathable materials; and people are realizing they don’t have to be uncomfortable in their clothes. There are better options in the industry, and once customers find them, they’re not letting go.



**Colorblocking/’90s Throwback**

Fashion brands saw the colorblocking trend take off in 2010, and though it took a hiatus for several years, it’s back – and bigger than before. Companies like Cotopaxi flaunt bright jackets and backpacks while promo-



**“Forward-thinking distributors are going the private label route much more than they used to.”**

Mark Corscadden,  
Dei Rossi Marketing



This orange and granite slub tee (T660GR) from Boxercraft adds a rich pop of color to any wardrobe.

tional suppliers are adopting the trend in different ways, like adding a solid blue pocket onto a red T-shirt, or vice versa. Colorblocking comes in many shapes and sizes: It can be subtle or extravagant and undoubtedly allows brands to have fun and show off their personalities.

“Nineties-inspired clothing is definitely back in our markets with schools and spiritwear, and that seems to be trickling down from what we see with celeb-

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rity styles and retail stores,” says Foland. “Bright colors are in, and people are pairing them in bold, exciting ways, whether it’s jackets, oversized sweatshirts, lounge pants or even accessories. It’s a way to express oneself through apparel, and the color-blocking conveys vibrancy and energy.”

On a more toned-down scale, customers can find this design technique on polos, with large squares or stripes across the body; leggings, with one color below the knee and a second color from the knee to the hip; and hats with a different color brim than crown. Even footwear companies – which tend to evoke trends in retail that spread far and wide – are coming out with new models that boast distinct, contrasting color panels.



**Patterns**

Florals, plaid, camouflage, animal print – the fashion world is seeing plenty of busy prints for fall lines, and the promo industry is right on trend. Plaid is considered timeless by many fashion connoisseurs, and suppliers are having success with plaid shirts, lounge pants, accessories and outerwear. Bold patterns play into the layered look many consumers are



Richardson's trucker snapback (112) from Kati Sportcap comes in 67 color and pattern options.

going for, wearing several different colors, prints and fabrics to give an outfit a very textured and comfortable appearance.

A cult classic, the plaid flannel shirt remains a staple in many regions around the country, and despite small ebbs in the trend, it seems to always bounce back. “Fortunately, the plaid flannels continue to be popular among our client base year after year,” says Foland. “We go out into the market and see these styles everywhere from kidswear in big box stores to high-end handcrafted heritage brands.”

Even headwear companies are confident that patterns are gaining momentum. Gary Mosley, owner of Kati Sportcap & Bag (asi/64140) in Houston, TX, has seen a

surge in sales of its Richardson-style trucker cap, which allows customers to mix and match brim patterns, like camouflage, streaks, plaids and florals with bright mesh backs. “It’s an old favorite, but the trucker craze isn’t going away any time soon,” says Mosley. “They’re our biggest sellers, especially the patterned styles.”



**Bling**

Over the years, distributors have sold their fair share of rhinestone-studded apparel to segments like agriculture organizations, rodeos, jean companies and school spirit wear markets, especially in the Southwest and Midwest. Clients wanted everything “blinged out,” including jacket backs, jean pockets, gloves and even boots. These days, the trend has faded to old news, and the companies are moving on to different decoration offerings like foil inks, glitter print and other eye-catching printing effects.

“There are always those that hang on but this fad has died out among my clients,” says Corscaden. “I partner with companies like In Your Face Apparel (asi/62494) or T-Shirt Tycoon Solutions (asi/87000), which offer dozens of options to highlight brands in a noticeable way that fits the client. When one fad ends, another begins, and we’re offering options to fill that space.”

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