

# Lingerie

A California Apparel News Special Section

## Lingerie Designers Focus on Their Foundations

Makers of lingerie, sleepwear and loungewear are scaling back their offerings to concentrate on their core products during the economic downturn.

By Rhea Cortado Associate Editor

As a new loungewear company, Malibu, Calif.-based **Keep Me** was still figuring out its market niche when the recession started late last year.

The sudden downturn pushed co-owners Ali Kay and Anne des Barres to scrap the production schedule of seasonal collections with monthly deliveries and focus on what they did best: cranking out comfy, basic loungewear styles, keeping them in stock and shipping them immediately.

"We don't need to reinvent the wheel every season," Kay said. "Our focus is making the ultimate wardrobe for your home and where you can always get those things all the time."

The tactic has been a boon for the designers during a time when uncertainty in the retail market has specialty stores ordering closer to delivery date.

"We minimize risk on our stores," said Kay, who adds small runs of new styles and colors "as needed." "We keep the stock on our end, and we don't impose any minimums. We have stores that send us reorders every week." Because the company sources its Modal and Modal/spandex fabric and production in Los Angeles, it can make small batches in a pinch.

Keep Me is one of several California-based brands in the loungewear and lingerie market re-examining the heart of their business and making changes to stay afloat during the recession. Whether it be trimming superfluous categories, fine-tuning the look and fit of the product, or reorganizing



**THINK LOCAL:** Keep Me loungewear produces in Los Angeles, making it easy for the brand to stay in stock.

production and operations on the business side, manufacturers are sharpening their business wits and getting creative.

### Getting back to their core business

At an affordable price point of \$12 to \$16 retail, **Honeydew's** panties and rumba boy-shorts—displayed in happy colors and funky fruit, candy and animal prints—satisfy a cheap and cheerful impulse buy. In 2007, Honeydew tried its hand with a separate sleepwear division that translated the brand's cute prints into burnout knit tops and lounge bottoms.

"[The stores] definitely gave us support. Everyone wanted to believe in it," said founder Benny Zafrani, who recently shelved the sleepwear division in light of the economy's weak sales. Zafrani's concentration is back on Honeydew's panties. He slashed the line's standard encyclopedic print offerings

in half and is instead channeling growth through tops, such as matching baby-doll and camisole tops that coordinate with the core panties. A foundations bra line is set to launch for 2010. "We're tying it all back to Honeydew, whereas in the past [with sleepwear], we had a whole collection," Zafrani said.

**Piege**, the parent company of **Felina** and **Jezebel**, has also flirted with expanding its fashionable-foundations reputation into new territory. Felina launched a sleepwear division last year that is no longer in production. The company had "great previews" with top-tier stores for a higher-end line named Piege that the company presented during the August 2008 market. But then "the bottom fell out of the economy. We just decided to pull the plug," said Vice President of Sales John Adams.

Now, Adams said, the company's "strategy is going back to what made Felina successful, which is everyday wearable product that has a fashionable, European appeal to it with terrific fabrics, laces, embroideries and embellishments." Retail prices are \$35 to \$38. In step with Felina's reputation for well-fitting bras, the brand now offers a plus-size range.

Sleepwear items proved to be a better match for the fast, fun Jezebel brand, which is often purchased in sets. Chemises, camisoles, baby dolls and shorts have been integrated within Jezebel's foundations collections.

"The prices—we didn't have to make any moves on," Adams said. Case in point, during the Valentine's Day rush at **Macy's** this year, Felina and Jezebel combined were "up to plan" by 27 percent for the month of February. "People were planning conservatively because of what was happening in the economy. It exceeded everybody's expectations," Adams said.

Wendy Glez-Crowe, founder of **Wendy Glez** loungewear,

is choosing her battles when deciding where to trim. After three seasons, Glez-Crowe dropped her higher-end division of lingerie and lingerie-inspired ready-to-wear, called **Wendy Glez Black Label**. A luxe silk charmeuse bra retailed for about \$100, and a silk charmeuse robe retailed for around \$200.

Glez-Crowe is rearranging production to help reduce her prices, taking steps such as purchasing prints for less in Peru but continuing to use the custom lace imported from Italy and France that the brand is known for. She will also move 30 percent of her Spring 2010 production to Peru. The remaining 70 percent will continue to be produced in Los Angeles. Glez-Crowe hopes these changes will reduce wholesale prices so that a camisole will retail for about \$60, down from about \$80. "That makes a big difference in retail," Crowe said.

### Multifunctional purpose

In an economy where customers think twice before making a purchase, buyers seek out lingerie and loungewear designs that fulfill a multifunctional purpose.

At **Only Hearts** in Santa Monica, Calif., manager Lisa Fremont said the brand's "Second Skin" underpinnings sell "all day long" because the camisoles and slips can be worn during the day as underpinnings and also at home as sleepwear. "That's our bread and butter. We're known for that," Fremont said.

Designers have kept versatility in mind for their Spring collections. Glez-Crowe's Wendy Glez designs are known to have a comfortable loungewear aesthetic but can also

be worn outside the home. The long scarf-like drape on a sweater knit cardigan from her Spring 2010 line can hang free, be tied in front or be thrown over the shoulder like a wrap. Retailers "want things that are drapery, versatile, a lot more wearable, interchangeable," Glez-Crowe said.

Alison Rubke, owner of lingerie shop **Faire Frou Frou** in Studio City, Calif., said she edits each order more carefully.

"I'm trying to get the fashion pieces that might work for everyday type of use, rather than a bra with so many bows and ruffles on it that you couldn't wear it under a blouse at work,"



**PRETTY BASICS:** Felina is focusing on its affordable fashion bras and panties.

said Rubke, who stocks labels such as **Huit**, **Damaris**, **Stella McCartney** and **Vannina Vesperini**.

In the case of fashion lingerie designer Carol Malony, whose creations are festooned with embellishment, Malony said she is making the ornamentations removable, "so it could be worn plain, whereas before I wouldn't worry about it." For example, Malony redesigned her "Powderpuff" bra from last season so that the feather puffs sprouting from the bra cups are now removable.

She also hired a veteran fit designer to fine-tune the fit of the bras and expand the size range. "I know that there is no margin for error in this economy," she said. "It's really got to fit. It's really got to be comfortable. It's got to serve you well. Otherwise, people think they're wasting money." ●



**PLUS SLEEPWEAR:** Honeydew's retooled sleepwear is an expansion of its existing panty line using the same fabrics.