

BUSINESS CLASS

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*Travel Rebound
Opens Door for
New Accessories*

What travel accessories do frequent travelers want most?

How about disposable underwear? Or a laptop case to match those Prada pumps? Or tube socks with a hidden compartment for your valuables?

These were just some of the thousands of items on display this past weekend at the Washington Convention Center, where more than 5,000 travel and luggage goods manufacturers, retailers and suppliers gathered for the 57th annual Travel Goods convention.

For the first time since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, travel goods buyers and retailers are starting to see an uptick in purchases. With the economy improving and business travel picking up, travel suppliers are rolling out a new wave of products to appeal to travelers' desires for greater security, comfort, convenience and individuality.

For example, there was the \$24 pair of socks made by ZipIt Gear Inc. The travel socks have a hidden, zippered compartment where users can hide their identification, money or keys.

There were also the packets of five pieces of disposable cotton underwear, sold for \$10 by Santa Monica, Calif.-based Onederwear Co. The packages—briefs or boxers for men, briefs or thongs for women—are aimed at those travelers who want to wear them once and discard them to make room in their luggage for gifts, or those travelers who can't stand the thought of repacking dirty underwear for their return home.

(Most of the items are available on the companies' individual Web sites or through various travel goods retailers.)

It was clear that suppliers are trying to offer products designed for the tastes of female travelers.

Luggage manufacturers say that women not only want their luggage to match their personality or outfit, but that they want to be able to find it at the luggage carousel.

"It used to be luggage was something travelers had to carry as a necessity on trips. But no longer; today they've become fashion accessories," said Michele Marini Pittenger, president of the Travel Goods Association.

Potomac native Kara Buttimer, now president of her own Philadelphia-based laptop case design firm, KaraB Inc., created a line of laptop cases that start at \$80 and come in bright colors such as hot pink or lime green.

"They're for the woman who is tired of the black nylon bag," Buttimer said.

In addition to bright colors, prints and even new fabrics such as flocked suede vinyl, female travelers also want more compartments in their suitcases, said Samsonite spokeswoman Susan Simkins. So the

See BUSINESS CLASS, E6, Col. 1

BUSINESS CLASS*Travelers Ready to Accessorize*

BUSINESS CLASS, From E1

Luggage manufacturer has introduced a new line of luggage that includes additional sections for toiletries, cosmetics, shoes and other items.

Washington's own Ira Goldman, manufacturer of the Knee Defender, was there showing off his device. Judging by the number of folks who gathered at the booth, the Knee Defender was one of the more popular products—helped by the notice it has received in newspapers and magazines and on TV talk shows.

The Knee Defender, which Goldman began selling last October, is a palm-sized piece of plastic that clips on the arms of a plane's open tray table, creating a wedge against the seat in front and thereby stopping the passenger from reclining the seat. Goldman says he has sold "thousands" of the device through his Web site.

The government-approved Travel Sentry luggage locks—which some airport security agents continue to break into even though they have keys to unlock them—were there and even won the industry's award for product innovation of the year.

The makers of an inflatable, molded back cushion called the 1st Class Sleeper demonstrated their \$50 invention. The cushion, which is the brainchild of Alaska Airlines pilot Bob Duncan and his wife, Mary Jane, is targeted to passengers with back or neck pain who want that extra comfort during long flights.

For those travelers who cringe at the thought of using one of those airline blankets, Miami-based PB Travel's \$16

fleece blanket, which comes in neon green, orange and purple, rolls up and has its own plastic carrying case. PB Travel's Margherita Blanc said the 40-by-60-inch blankets were popular especially now that airlines—because of their financial struggles—have cut back on the number of blankets they offer passengers and don't clean them as often.

There were also updates to some traditional travel items. For example, for \$30, a traveler can have a color-coordinated or leopard-print eye mask and pillow courtesy of Bucky Products Inc. And there's luggage manufacturer Travelon's \$10 sleeping mask, which comes with a reversible sign so snoozing passengers can alert the flight attendant to either "do not disturb" or "only awake for meals."

Northwest shuts ticket offices: Those airline city ticket offices seem to be on their way to joining the Boeing 727 and hot meals in aviation history.

Northwest Airlines last week became the first airline to announce plans to close all of its city ticket offices in an effort to cut costs. The 25 offices will be closed by the end of March.

The move will affect 76 employees, including two at the office at 17th and K streets downtown. The 76 will be offered jobs elsewhere in the company.

Several airlines, including US Airways and United, have reduced the number of city ticket offices across the country, but Northwest becomes the first airline to close all of them.

Staff researcher Richard Drezzen contributed to this report.