

# Sears targets teens with MTV film, LL Cool J gear

CHICAGO (AP) — First came the decision to stock Skechers, a line of footwear teens favor. Then came the personalized avatar, the virtual identity Sears shoppers could accessorize online.

Now, the company that once offered in-store hearing aids and dentures is teaming up with MTV to produce a back-to-school movie while adding a line of street clothes and accessories designed by hip-hop artist LL Cool J.

After spending years trying to get shoppers to embrace its softer side, the ailing retailer is still known more for its hardware than handbags. So its latest strategy to stem slumping sales is trying to tap yet another new market: the young, hip and urban.

"While mom may decide what the acceptable place is to shop, the kids are deciding what clothes they want and what places have it," said Richard Gerstein, Sears' chief marketing officer. "If we come out of our season

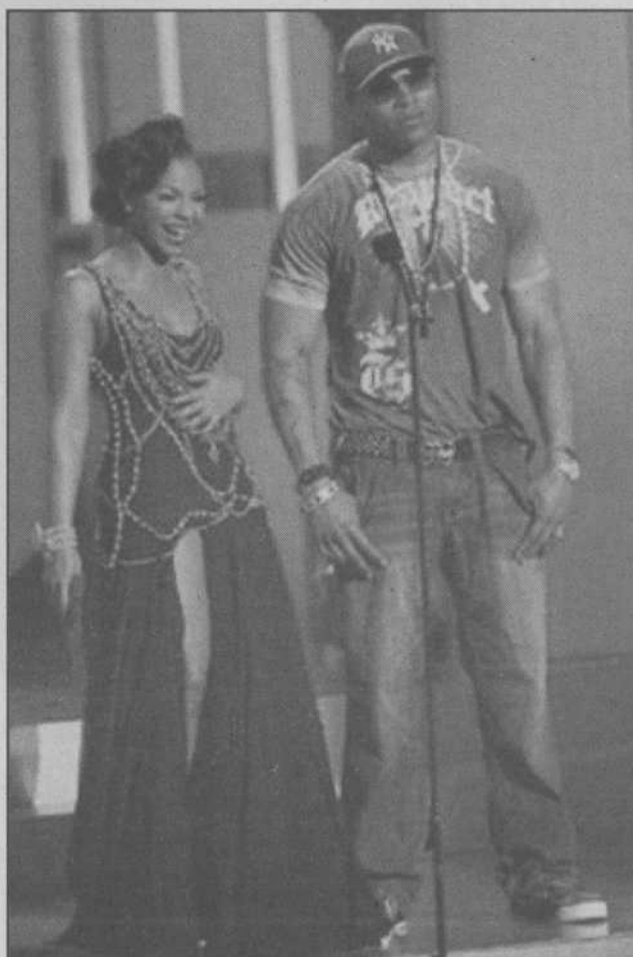
with much more relevance with this group, and improving our sales and profitability with this group, we think it's a big win."

Whether the initiatives can help Sears shed its stale image is up in the air. But what's certain, experts say, is that the chain led by financier Edward Lampert desperately needs to reinvent itself if it's going to survive.

"It's a great place to buy a washing machine, but you wouldn't want to get your jeans there," said Jayne Mountford, vice president of trend reporting for Stylesight, a global retail forecasting firm.

That's the sentiment Sears executives hope "The American Mall" movie and the LL Cool J gear, which will be available in mid-September, can change — particularly among the fickle and trend-conscious teen audience that's so far viewed the chain with caution.

"The American Mall," produced by the team respon-



Singer Ashanti, left, and hip-hop artist LL Cool J present Best New Artist award at the 2008 BET Awards in Los Angeles on Tuesday. LL Cool J gear will be sold at Sears.

sible for the tween-loved "High School Musical" series, is a massive cross-promotion between MTV and Sears.

Scenes for the 87-minute film were shot in a Utah Sears store. Characters wear Sears clothes, which shoppers can purchase. And the actors will appear in Sears advertisements and circulars. Meanwhile, Sears will sell the DVD and soundtrack in stores, while promoting the film and getting commercial time when the movie airs on MTV on Aug. 11.

Neither Sears nor MTV executives would disclose their investment in the project, which has been in the works since November.

"If the movie works, it will benefit Sears certainly, as their exposure will benefit us," said John Shea, the executive vice president of integrated marketing and brand partnerships at MTV Networks Music & Logo Group.

But some industry observers said they don't believe

Sears has the credibility to compete in the increasingly crowded teen market. Nor are they sure whether this latest effort will yield more success than previous initiatives aimed at bringing back shoppers.

"Trying to be everything to everybody is difficult because consumers have so many choices," said Morningstar analyst Kim Picciola. "If they can manage to reinvent themselves, I think it will be a big win for them. But I think that's going to be a challenge in this current environment."

Founded in 1886, Sears helped pioneer the mail-order business and grew to become the nation's largest retailer. It remained a back-to-school staple for generations but fell out of favor as shoppers who found its brands dowdy and unexciting defected to other stores.

In 2005, Lampert acquired Sears, Roebuck and Co., and merged it with (See Sears, Page 11)

## Changing course, Smiley pushes Obama support

Bonnie V. Winston

Special to Sentinel-Voice

RICHMOND, Va. (NNPA) — Political commentator and national talk show host Tavis Smiley seemingly has softened his position on Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

In an exclusive interview with the *Richmond Free Press*, Smiley lauded the Illinois senator for his historic achievement in becoming the first African-American to run for president under a major party banner.

He also denied that his departure from the hugely popular "Tom Joyner Morning Show" was linked to his stance on Sen. Obama.

"I don't allow people to run me away from anywhere," he said in a phone interview from his Los Angeles home. "I start and leave on my terms."

Smiley, who was set to speak in Richmond, became the subject of much speculation in April when it was announced he would be quitting Joyner's radio show after 12 years of offering twice

weekly commentaries on politics and a range of other subjects.

It was rumored that he is leaving because of his tough posture on Sen. Obama, particularly among throngs of listeners who fervently supported the senator's historic nomination quest.

Joyner said at the time that Smiley quit because he couldn't handle the criticism from listeners upset because "he's always busting Barack Obama's chops."

But, Smiley denies it.

In the past, the 43-year-old Smiley has criticized Obama for not attending the State of the Black Union for the past two years. Smiley has convened the event — a national conversation on issues pertinent to the Black community — for eight years. In February 2007, when the televised convocation drew 10,000 people to Hampton University, Obama was announcing his historic bid for president from the statehouse in Illinois that very weekend.

Smiley explained during the interview, as he has in a commentary, that his contract is up with Joyner's show. He said he is fatigued with rising at 3 a.m. everyday to meet the show's 6 a.m. start on the East Coast. He said there are other things he

wants to do.

His last commentaries on the show will come at the end of June. "You mentioned empowerment. Well, I want to move on and do other things," he said.

While Smiley said that Obama — and all elected officials — must be held accountable to the people who put them in office, he noted that Sen. Obama's history-making nomination "releases progressive possibilities and portends for us — people of color and for women — the opportunity to do things that

we heretofore have not had a chance to do."

But, he cautioned, the general election campaign against Republican John McCain will be a bruiser.

"We have to brace ourselves for the ugliest, nastiest racist, most expensive campaign ever in this country," he said. "I don't think people have really grasped yet how ugly, nasty, racist and divisive this race is going to become."

Smiley called on people to prepare to defend Sen. Obama "against any and all

White supremacist attacks" that are certain to be launched.

"We have to stay informed. We have to stay awake. We have to stay alert. We have to stay aware," Smiley said. "And we have the obvious call to be involved — in controlling our destiny in every step that we can. So we have to get involved. Whether people support Obama or McCain, you have to be involved in the process."

Bonnie V. Winston writes for the *Richmond Free Press*.

## Ads

(Continued from Page 4)

Wright without first tackling other topics.

"You should undermine Obama's credibility on things that are not debatable," Fabrizio said, such as his willingness to negotiate with adversaries and his call to wind down the Iraq war promptly. Once questions of Obama's experience and judgment are raised, he said, "the Wright issue would have more bite."

Holt, the GOP consultant, said third-party groups may play a smaller role in this election than last, but he would not be surprised if someone hit Obama with ads comparable to the Swift Boat criticism. Those ads were highly effective against Kerry in 2004, he said, because they fed into existing voter doubts about his sincerity. "It was in our message framework," Holt said, even though "we had nothing to do with it."

"I think the Democrats will try to tag McCain with whatever irresponsible advertising comes out of these groups," Holt said. "But McCain has a reputation with the American people" that will largely insulate him from such criticism, he said.

## Naomi sorry for assault

LONDON (AP) — Model Naomi Campbell says she is sorry she assaulted two police officers during a dispute about lost luggage aboard a British Airways plane. But she has refused to apologize to the airline, accusing it of racism.

British Airways strongly denied the charge.

Campbell, 38, was sentenced Friday to 200 hours of community service and fined \$4,600 after she pleaded guilty to kicking, spitting and swearing at the officers aboard a plane at Heathrow Airport in April.

In an interview with Sky News broadcast Saturday, Campbell said she regretted her behavior and said "I apologize profusely" to the police.

"As for British Airways, I don't apologize," she said.

Campbell accused British Airways staff of having racist attitudes.

"I was called a racial name on that flight,"

Campbell said, adding that her violent behavior "was part of my reaction." She did not say who had called her the name, but said it was not a passenger.

In a statement, British Airways said it "does not accept any allegations of racism."

"We are proud of our diversity. We fly to 90 different countries around the world and employ a multi-nationality work force," the airline said. "We have strict policies concerning dignity at work and have long-standing training programs on diversity and inclusion."

Campbell has a history of assaulting assistants and employees.

Last year, she was sentenced to a week of community service in New York City after admitting "reckless assault" for throwing a mobile phone at her housekeeper.

In 2000, she pleaded guilty in Toronto to an assault charge for beating an assistant while making a film in Canada.