

## On Eyeglasses and Watches

The other day, my wife Val went to Wal\*Mart to get fitted for new prescription glasses. It was somewhat of a long process, so I had to cool my heels. Now, there isn't much inside a store like Wal\*Mart to keep me amused while waiting, unlike old bookstores where I could spend hours. So I started looking at the myriad of frames displayed on the wall. There were frames for women, men, children and frames for outdoor activity. I couldn't help counting the brands. I understand that glasses are an important aid, that society couldn't function if people's vision were not corrected. For one thing, half of us wouldn't be permitted to drive, read a newspaper or operate a smartphone. But then that may not be a bad idea to get half the drivers off the road. Glasses are probably the least appreciated health or lifestyle aid in existence.

However, the proliferation of brands surprised me. Eyeglasses have been in regular use since the 13th century, although reading aids date back millennia. Apart from the lens, the frame itself couldn't be more simple. It holds the two lenses, with two handles connected by a hinge, the handle's end resting on your ear. A small pad cushions the frame against the bridge of the nose. Portraits of Benjamin Franklin sometimes show him wearing glasses. He is credited with inventing the bifocal lens in 1784. That's 229 years ago. Lenses are not typically endorsed by celebrities. Wouldn't you want to buy Mickey Rooney or Ann Margret bifocals? But frames are another story. Someone somewhere is trying to reinvent the proverbial wheel, in this case the eyeglass frame, then getting a celebrity name. Inventors are still filing patents for frame variations.

Here are the women's brands of frames: Alice & Frank, Apple Bottoms, Barbie, Body Glove, Bongo, Christine Brinkley, Cover Girl, Daisy Fuentes, Essence, George, Hard Candy, Hello Kitty, JLo, L.e.i, Luxembourg, Madison Avenue, Offsides, Oleg Cassini, Paula Deen (that Paula Deen?), Pomy, Sally Hansen, Sophia Loren, Sport180, Tigress, Victorious, Visage. Then there's Caribbean Sun, Liberty, Red Ridge and Sol for "outdoor" wear.

The guys don't have as many brands: Adolfo, Cafe Luna, Duck Commander, Easytwist, George, iStamp, m+Flex, Oscar, Pomy, Randy Jackson, Russell Simmons, Stetson, Steven Wyler, M+Air, Trend, via Milano, Wrangler.

Mind you, this is only one store. I have never heard of most of the characters who lent their names, for a fee I'm sure. Daisy Fuentes? Randy Jackson? Sally Hansen? Who dey? Designer brands, which of course Wal\*Mart doesn't carry, are Dolce & Gabbana, Ferragamo, Gucci, Prada, Ralph Lauren, Tiffany, Versace. I checked Neiman Marcus and they have Tom Ford, Stella McCartney and Oliver Peoples. Really? If Ms. McCartney were Stella McDougall, would Neiman sell her frames? Do they make me see better?

Do we need all these brands of frames? The most important parts of eyeglasses are the lenses. That's where technology comes in - trifocals, transition, progressive, shatterproof, polarized, etc. But frames? Brand proliferation is a way of life today. Blame it on the marketers. They want to capture every segment. Let's start with your friendly neighborhood grocery store - I mean supermarket. There are an average of nearly 40,000 SKU's in those stores. SKU's stand for stock keeping unit; each item that differs in size or flavor is one SKU. A Wal\*Mart superstore

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would have as many as 175,000. Wal\*Mart even tried to reduce that number, a process called “rationalization” but had to backtrack. People want choices! When it comes to frames for eyeglasses, the consumer certainly has enough choices.

Another product that has caught my attention with regards to brands is the luxury watch. I mean those watches that go for \$5,000 and up, going as high as six figures. You see them regularly advertised in the Wall Street Journal. There’s the well known brands, Rolex and Cartier. There’s Tag Heuer, endorsed by no less than Maria Sharapova. Plus Audemars Piguet, Bell & Ross, Blancpain, Breguet, Carl Bucherer, Chopard, Girard Perregaux, Hublot, Louis Moinet, Louis Vuitton, Parmigiani Fleurier, Patek Philippe, Piaget, Richard Mille, Ulysee Nardin, Vacheron Constantin and Zenith. What makes an expensive watch expensive? Besides the accoutrements of precious stones, it is the complications. That is, anything the watch tells you besides the time. I suppose there’s a watch out there which can tell you the times of the tides. Patek Philippe takes the cake at 33 complications.

If you want to wear a Rolex or Cartier, I can get you a good price. I mean really, really good. Like \$25. That means you could buy hundreds of these “replicas” for the price of the authentic one. Our vendor of choice is a Muslim who calls himself Marlon. He hangs out at Viramall in Quezon City, accompanied by his entourage of wives and runners. He is a really nice soft spoken guy but a very persuasive salesman. Before you know it, you’ve bought “Gucci” bags, “Polo” or “Abercrombie” golf shirts and “Hermes” scarves besides your new “Rolex,” “Cartier” or “Patek Philippe” watch. Of course the replicas don’t have the durability, I had one “Rolex” conk out after a month. But I have a “Cartier” and a “Rolex” from my cousin Naring which are still running years later. When I went to the Fairfield mall to have the Cartier’s battery replaced, the watch store technician asked me if it was real. If he couldn’t tell the difference right away, it must be a pretty good copy. If you will contribute to my airfare to Manila, I’ll text Marlon ahead of time to gather up your orders.

I have a 20 year old Timex, the watch that takes a licking and keeps on ticking. It has never needed repair, only a new battery every a year or so. I’ve changed the band several times. It still keeps perfect time, never needing adjustment. I’ve dropped it numerous times. It has been immersed in seawater around the Philippines, Hawaii and Florida. So keep your Audemars Piguet, one of which is listed in eBay for \$25,999. Besides I can’t even pronounce it. A Timex is less than \$100. My Timex was made in the island of Cebu in the Philippines.

Why am I writing all this? It all started with a trip to Wal\*Mart.

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