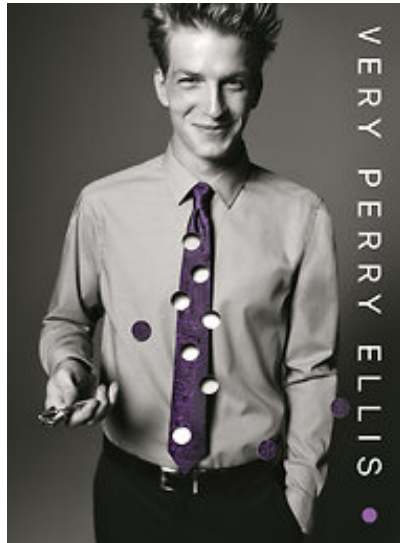


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A Playful Makeover for Perry Ellis

By STUART ELLIOTT



AN initiative by a maker of apparel, [Perry Ellis International](#), to revitalize its flagship Perry Ellis men's wear brand will soon have consumers seeing spots, in the form of polka dots.

The dots are meant to evoke the heritage of the Perry Ellis brand and signal that a playful attitude for which the brand was known is coming back. For instance, in one print advertisement, the polka dots look as if they were produced by a puckish model wielding a hole puncher.

In addition to appearing in the print ads, the polka dots will decorate hang tags and turn up, discreetly, in garment linings.

The print ads are part of a campaign for Perry Ellis clothing, with a budget estimated at \$10 million, that is intended to stimulate demand for fall merchandise like men's shirts. The ads are being created by a new agency for the brand, Yard, based in New York. Knock, an agency in Minneapolis, worked on the new hang tags as well as a redesign of packaging and the Perry Ellis logo.

In addition to reviving heritage elements like the polka dots, the campaign will seek to freshen the brand image for contemporary consumers who may not be familiar with the designer Perry Ellis. At his death in 1986 at the age of 46, he was considered one of the Big Three of American fashion designers along with Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren.

That effort is underlined by the theme of the campaign, "Very Perry Ellis," which is also intended to remind shoppers of the days when those words were heard from Seventh Avenue to malls around the country.

“The brand, when it was first launched, was one of the first true designer brands,” said Carmine Petruzello, president for Perry Ellis men’s wear at Perry Ellis International in New York.

“The Perry Ellis dress shirt was very recognizable from the pleat on the sleeve,” he added. “It was like wearing a swoosh on a sneaker.”

The campaign comes after changes in the executive suite that included the arrival of Mr. Petruzello. “There’s a new team here,” he said, one whose “idea is what would it be like today if Perry were still driving the bus.”

So there is “a little harken-back to Perry,” he added, like the polka dots, and forward steps like offering garments that would appeal to “a 20-something guy.”

For example, the brand is collaborating with the designers of the trendy Duckie Brown label for a line to come out in spring 2013.

The Perry Ellis brand needs to speak to younger men, according to the most recent Fashion Brand Index survey conducted by Brand Keys, a brand and customer-loyalty consulting company.

“It went from being a resonant brand to a classic brand to an old brand,” said Robert Passikoff, president at Brand Keys in New York, adding that it did not finish among the top 15 men’s clothing brands in the survey.

However, there is precedent for a makeover of a venerable apparel brand to succeed, Mr. Passikoff said, citing how Brooks Brothers, also once outside the top 15, is now in ninth place on the survey.

There was no consideration given to changing the Perry Ellis brand name because research by Perry Ellis International found there were still valuable aspects to the brand and its ties to Mr. Ellis.

“We looked for inspiration in Perry himself,” said Stephen Niedzwiecki, co-founder and chief creative officer at Yard, and focused on the fact that “in his short life he had a serious impact on the industry by not taking it all that seriously.”

“Along with his distinctive style and approach to life,” Mr. Niedzwiecki said, “he left a legacy of levity.” That attitude could be appealing, said Ruth Bernstein, co-founder and chief strategic officer at Yard, to men who “care about style but don’t take fashion so seriously.”

The print ads try to display that insouciant spirit. In addition to the ad with the hole puncher, there is one with a younger man sporting an oversize bow tie made of paper and a satisfied expression.

In a third ad, a younger man wears a giant flower in his lapel and a dog leans in from the right side of the page as if interrupting the photo shoot. Some ads have a single polka dot; others have a lot.

“The dot is an optimistic shape we can play with,” said another recent arrival at Perry Ellis International, Matt Cronin, vice president of marketing for the Perry Ellis brand, and is supposed to symbolize “a fun, whimsical attitude.”

A goal of the campaign is to attract men ages 26 to 35 to the brand, he added, to join customers who “right now are 45.”

To help accomplish that, the campaign will have a major presence in social media like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). The ads will also run in publications like Esquire, GQ, The New York Times, Out and WWD Men’s Week and appear on signs in Los Angeles and New York.

In its attempts to revitalize the Perry Ellis brand, Perry Ellis International confronts an uncertain economy that has lately meant mixed results for department stores. That is the primary retail outlet for the brand, in chains like Dillard’s, Lord & Taylor and Macy’s.

“At retail, there’s not a lot of growth,” Mr. Petruzello acknowledged. “Opportunities are more a matter of gaining market share. It’s out there to be had.”

Now that is as optimistic as a parade of polka dots.