Seven years ago fewer than 3% of US apparel buyers felt fashion brands and logos – particularly as it related to luxury brands – were increasing in importance when it came to differentiating their wardrobes. In recent years, retailers might blame the economy for that, but not anymore.

Last year – on trend with a growing desire among consumers for product differentiation and delight – the role of fashion brands doubled in import (28%). That sentiment is holding firm again this year at 29%, with expectations rising and consumers increasingly looking for uniqueness in their fashion brands to meet those expectations.

"With every fashion option, from black t-shirts to the latest couture just a keystroke away, brand meaning is increasingly a larger factor in the buying decision. This fits with what we are seeing, not only in fashion, but across all the product/service categories we track," said Amy Shea, executive vice president of global brand development for Brand Keys, Inc., the New York-based brand and customer loyalty research consultancy. "The economic pressures of late did not impact price alone. This financial reality has prompted a conversation about meaning, and those brands that actually stand for something are being sought out by consumers. These findings are an incredibly accurate measure of the "consumer-in-charge" mindset shift, particularly in regard to the brands they see as being more important when it comes time to decide which brand to buy."

"The critical word in that finding is 'buy,'" noted Shea. "Last year's findings predicted that value, not price, was the switch-on in consumer behavior. And you can't have the value conversation without an authentic brand conversation. True brands provide meaningful differentiation in a world over-run by commodities – this is especially true in fashion, which is why so many of the fashion brands consumers feel most engaged with are luxury brands, which have built their houses on emotional meaning."

"The findings prove that brands can act as a *surrogate* for value. But to profit from this equation you must be a real brand, not merely a well-known or celebrity-backed offering that stands for little in consumers' minds. Authentic luxury fashion brands have reached their highest level of consequence since the 1960′s," added Brand Keys' Shea.

The Brand Keys Fashion 15
For the total audience of 7,500 men and women, 21 to 65 years of age, who participated in the Brand Keys annual study, the top-15 fashion brands ranked on an unaided basis were:

1. Favorite Sports Team
2. Ralph Lauren
3. Armani
4. Calvin Klein
5. J. Crew
6. Banana Republic/Burberry
7. Levi's/Polo
8. Chanel
9. Dior/Versace
10. Guess
11. Tommy Hilfiger/Donna Karan
12. Brooks Brothers
13. Juicy Couture/Marc Jacobs/Victoria's Secret
14. Dolce & Gabbana/Gucci
15. Abercrombie & Fitch/Izod/Yves Saint Laurent

Among men's "Fashion15″ designated brands were:

1. Favorite Sports Team
2. Nike
3. Ralph Lauren/Polo
4. Armani
5. Calvin Klein
6. Tommy Hilfiger
7. Lacoste
8. Brooks Brothers
9. J. Crew
10. Banana Republic/Levi's
11. Burberry
12. Gucci
13. Guess
14. Abercrombie & Fitch/Izod
15. Hugo Boss/Tom Ford

Women's 2011 "Fashion 15″ brands were slightly more luxe this year, but included some mid-range brands:

1. Ralph Lauren
2. Favorite Sports Team
3. Armani
4. Chanel
5. Dior/Versace
6. Donna Karan
7. J. Crew
8. Burberry/Calvin Klein
9. Banana Republic
10. Levi's
11. Guess/Juicy Couture/Victoria's Secret
12. Marc Jacobs/Tom Ford
13. Dolce & Gabbana
14. Yves Saint Laurent
15. Tory Burch/Kate Spade/La Perlas

"The rising importance of fashion brands generally, and luxury fashion brands specifically, indicates that value – or the perception of value-via-brand – is of much greater import to consumers, and ultimately to the success of fashion brands," noted Shea.

"Given the levels of clothing available, it's not surprising that consumers are looking to brands to make a difference, to meet their expectations, and to delight them," said Shea. "In the context of fashion brands, value isn't just what consumers' dollars buy, it's how fashion fits the consumers' lifestyle, self-perception, and expectations. This is especially true in a retail marketplace overflowing an excess of similar products, congruous distribution, and bargain basement pricing," said Shea.

Methodology

Since 1996, Brand Keys has annually conducted a national Customer Loyalty Engagement Index survey of leading brands, currently assessing 79 product and service categories.

The survey is conducted among 45,000 men and women, 18 to 65 years of age, with respondents drawn from the nine U.S. Census regions. The majority of interviews are conducted via telephone; 20% of the interviews are conducted via central location intercept so as not to exclude “cell phone-only” consumers.

Nearly 20% of respondents, 7,500 respondents (50:50 Men/Women, aged 21 to 65 years of age) also respond to questions about the value or importance they place on the fashion brands and of the clothing brands they feel are important to them.

First, the respondents are asked to indicate the importance to them personally of fashion brands, compared to how important they were to them over recent years. The respondent choices are: Much more important; More important; About the same; Less important; or Much less important.

Then, on an unaided basis, respondents are asked *which* brands *were* more important to them.

This year’s bottom line? Real brand value and meaning will have more leverage than ever. “There are a lot of clothing labels competing out there, but – just like the automotive and consumer electronics categories – retailers are going to be seeing more culling of fashion brands by consumers,” predicted Shea.