

Global ambitions

A Hawaii Pavilion at a fashion fair in Japan aims to boost isle brands

By Nadine Kam

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Gov. Neil Abercrombie swept into office pledging at a fashion gathering in November 2010: "We're going to take island fashion to new heights in terms of our exports. We're not just going to be sending dollars out of the state, we're going to be bringing dollars into the state because fashion is going to be a centerpiece of our administration."

Politicians aren't generally on the list of most trusted people, and knowing how slowly government works, most of the 200 industry people in the audience at Island Edge that day were hopeful, but likely took that message with a grain of salt.

Now, a little more than a year and a half year later, Abercrombie's administration is making good on his word. There are plans to revive the Governor's Fashion Industry Awards and, with a grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration, the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism will be presenting a Hawaii Pavilion at the JFW International Fashion Fair, Japan's largest fashion trade show, July 18 to 20.

DBEDT submitted its application in May 2011 and was granted \$485,000 by the Small Business Administration in September. The money will fund several projects, starting with the pavilion that will host 10 of Hawaii's largest fashion companies, as well as a booth for Hawaii Fashion Incubator, known as Hifi, which will house seven emerging designers: Organik Clothing, Salty Girl Jewelry, Allison Izu, Machine Machine, Honey Girl Waterwear, Day & Nite Hawaii and Jen Stone Jewelry.

The large companies represented are The Custom Co., Jams World/Surflin, Tori Richard, Avanti Fashion, Hilo Hattie, Paradise Found, Kai, Two Palms, Wings Sportswear, and Iolani.

"It's good that it's with DBEDT because it gives a whole credibility to what we're doing," said denim designer Allison Izu Song, who specializes in petite apparel, making her brand a good fit for the Japan market.

"I always thought about selling to Japan but didn't know how to get started. For small designers like us, we wouldn't make the kind of impact that a whole Hawaii pavilion would make."

Each company is responsible for its own travel expenses. Without funds to travel themselves, the Hifi designers will be represented by Yuriko Galura, a brand representative, and Ed Fernandez, founder of Organik. Both have been to enough trade shows to know what to expect.

"I've had one-on-ones with the designers, discussing everything from line sheets, translations, shipping and delivery," Fernandez said. "It's totally different from working locally or nationally."

ACCORDING to Dennis Ling, an administrator with the Brand Development and Support Division of DBEDT, the Small Business Administration offers grants to get state economies running again by raising the value of their exports, and by making American businesses more competitive overseas and reducing trade imbalances. Remaining funds will go toward participation in other trade shows, activities and partnerships that help promote Hawaii fashion abroad.

Success will be measured in direct sales, and Ling says, "We're going to be gauging sales in the next two years as required by the SBA."

Although the group could have promoted any industry that exports from Hawaii, Ling said a lot of thought went into the idea of rebuilding the fashion industry to the peak reached in the 1960s and '70s.

Hawaii's youth-oriented fashion culture coincided with the rise of surf, leisure and hippie culture. But it didn't take long for Hawaii style to find imitators overseas. By the mid-1990s, the once-strong Hawaii Fashion Guild, comprising local clothing manufacturers, had dissolved.

The trip comes at another critical moment in Japan-Hawaii ties. Japan travelers have long been enchanted by the islands and laid-back casual wear, and some savvy Japan manufacturers have begun creating their own versions of aloha wear, coinciding with the Japanese government's "Super Cool Biz" campaign that launched June 1.

Due to energy shortages after last year's tsunami and nuclear plant disaster, the energy-saving strategy encourages office workers to don casual clothes such as aloha shirts and T-shirts to limit use of air conditioning.

With imitation aloha wear also entering the country from China, Ling said, "I think it's time for us to protect our brand and present them with the authentic apparel."

"Helping the fashion industry will help our travel image as well. The aloha shirt is synonymous with Hawaii. It has a built-in recognition factor and will help bolster our brand."

The smaller brands' lack of manufacturing facilities might make it difficult to fill potential large orders at this point, Ling said, but the Japan trade show will be educational for all, and help them gauge interest in their product.

"They'll be able to learn a lot and use it as a learning experience to grow."

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