

How the Ball Cap Came To Rule the World

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Once the domain of just the diamond, the baseball cap has become the defining image of headwear. Here's how it made it to the top. Plus: a look at the hottest trends and leading sales strategies in headwear.

The sun was shining and title hopes filled the air outside Ebbets Field for the World Series. Men in cocked fedoras and flat caps stood in line at a hot dog stand, being served the game day staple by a stocky fellow in an ivy cap. The sea of hats waited for the ballpark gates to open to take in the 1920 title clash between the Brooklyn Robins and Cleveland Indians. It was the second World Series to be played at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn since the park was opened in April 1913, a year in which affluent patriarchs sat in the stands wearing stiff bowler hats as they watched Miss Genevieve Ebbets throw a ceremonial first pitch at an exhibition game.

These scenes from a bygone age – glimpsed in time-stained, black-and-white photographs – reveal how baseball caps back then belonged in only one place: on the diamond. Fast forward about a century, and a scan of the stands at any big league park reveals how headwear tastes have changed. From the peanut sellers to families to season-ticket-holding fans, nearly everyone wears a ball cap.

Of course, this in-park cap tableau is only representative of a broader phenomenon: the ball cap has become the de facto standard in American headwear. Worn ubiquitously for branding, fashion and/or protection from weather, the cap has become a symbol of the United States – not only as one of our chief stylistic exports, but also a portable mini-billboard for carrying messages about everything from brands to personal identity. “It’s functional, inexpensive and can broadcast whatever you want,” says Paul Lukas, an ESPN.com columnist and the creator of the sports uniform blog Uni Watch.

Not surprisingly, the popularity of ball caps translates into major sales. Behind bags, hats are the most commonly pitched accessory in the wearables segment of the promotional products industry, where both lower-price point styles and higher-end fashion-forward looks are sold in markets ranging from automotive to education. For example, headwear (and caps in particular) accounts for about 25% of Counselor Top 40 distributor Halo Branded Solutions’ (asi/356000) overall apparel sales, says Terry McGuire, vice president of marketing. “There is a great spot for advertising on the forehead and the baseball cap has taken advantage of that,” says Tom Shieber, senior curator at the National Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum.

Some estimates indicate that ball caps make up more than 80% of hat sales in the United States; The NPD Group, a New York-based market research firm, says 2010 retail cap and hat sales in the U.S. totaled \$1.7 billion. Consider, too, that New Era, the official maker of all on-field caps for Major League Baseball, generated \$343.7 million in revenue in 2007 and sold 35 million caps in 2008, says James Lilliefors, author of the book *Ball Cap Nation*. “Caps have gone way beyond baseball and sports,” Lukas says. “They have spread to cultures and countries that wouldn’t know a baseball game if it was plopped in front of them.”

Still, the cap remains a uniquely American creation, and it doesn’t appear the national hat will be changing anytime soon. In *Ball Cap Nation*, Lilliefors writes: “The ball cap feeds an idea that we,

Americans, seem to cherish: As different as we all are ... when we wear a ball cap, we're all part of the same team."

Ahead of the Trends

Which trends are defining the headwear game? Here are seven to watch:

1. **CUSTOMIZED CAPS:** Customized caps are becoming increasingly popular. End-buyers desire unique ball caps that convey brand image and distinction from competitors in a cluttered marketplace. Suppliers like Headwear USA (asi/60282) specialize in customizing caps in addition to standard offerings. With headwear, for example, every aspect of a cap can be customized, from fabric and fitting (flexfit, fitted, snapback) to embellishment type and decoration placement, says CEO Tony Karlicek. "It increases perceived value," he says.

2. **FASHION-FORWARD STYLES:** The retail world is exerting more influence on cap styles in the ad specialty realm. Already popular at retail, washed and distressed ball cap styles have become big sellers with everyone from auto body shops to universities and corporations recruiting college kids, says Karlicek. Another retail style making inroads is the flat bill cap, which has been embraced by everyone from high school teams to international beer brands. "It represents trendiness and youth and a lot of brands want to be associated with that," says Paul Medina, national sales manager at Cali-Fame of Los Angeles Inc. (asi/43456), a headwear manufacturer.

3. **OFF-LOCATION AND ALLOVER DECORATION:** Fashion has impacted promo cap decorating, too. Trends include more off-center logos as well as embellishment on the sides and brims of caps. "You're seeing people push the embroidery around and doing more work with a heat press on the bill where embroidery can't reach," says Erich Campbell, digitizer at New Mexico based Black Duck Embroidery & Screen-printing.

4. **THE GREAT OUTDOORS:** Performance fabrics, which are trending hot in apparel, are also growing more popular in caps. Moisture wicking caps can be great for corporate clients sponsoring a charity race or trying to encourage employees to live more active lifestyles. Additionally, Realtree-style caps have become a preferred choice by sellers and manufacturers of outdoor sports equipment, as well as other businesses that want to connect with an outdoors image. Increasingly, universities are putting their logos on Realtree-patterned caps.

5. **NOVELTY CAPS:** Some companies are turning to novelty caps to stir conversations about a brand. Karlicek points to a hat done for a well-known lawn and garden company that features a turf bill; another cap from brewer Foster's had an elongated bill that was humorously intended to create shadow for a beer in the wearer's hand, thus keeping the brew cool.

6. **BALL CAP ALTERNATIVE:** Ball caps dominate the headwear market, but fedoras, flat caps and pub caps have emerged as hip head coverings that some fashion-conscious brands want for promotional purposes, says David Goldman, vice president of Philadelphia Rapid Transit (asi/77945). Goldman cites Coca-Cola and Comcast (a fedora and pub cap, respectively) as major brands that used the hipster hats in recent promotions. "It works for brands looking for something a little different, a little trendier," he says.

7. TRIED AND TRUE: While not discounting emerging trends, many distributors say the ball cap style that continues to sell best is a basic unstructured model, featuring a fabric strap closure, a low profile and a client's logo positioned front and center. "It continues to be the biggest seller with our clients," Adrian Sasine, marketing director for the Ice Box (asi/229395). Basic six-panel structured caps with mid-profiles also remain popular.

Q: What was the most ever paid for a ball cap?

A: \$328,000 for a 1920s New York Yankees cap worn by Babe Ruth.

Q: Who wore the first baseball cap?

A: In 1849, the New York Knickerbockers wore baseball's first official uniform, which included a chip or straw hat, according to Tom Shieber, senior curator at the National Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum. The closest forerunner to the modern cap, however, was first worn by the Brooklyn Excelsiors in the 1860s. It featured a "small brim and round, forward-leaning crown, with a button on top of the stitching," writes cap expert James Lilliefors.

How to Cap-italize On Headwear

Distributors should eagerly reach for the dollars that companies and individuals are willing to spend on ball caps. To successfully sell this category, Howard Schwartz, president of HDS Marketing (asi/216807), says that distributors must understand their client, which includes identifying the customer's goal for a promotion. Beyond knowing a client's purpose, distributors must have a firm grasp of different cap fabrics, styles and trends (including retail fads) so they can match the client with a lid that meets the promotional objective. For example, if you're working with a technology company that wants to attract a youthful audience to a new gadget, then you should pitch a cap that has a hip fashion-forward look. "Make sure you know your client and their audience," says Pat Cavanaugh, CEO of Cavanaugh Marketing Group (asi/159262). "Different age Groups like different styles."

When pitching caps, distributors should emphasize their value as a mobile media that has the potential to create impressions wherever the wearer goes, says Schwartz. "If people like a cap they'll wear it every day," he says. "You'll get a whole lot more impressions than you would with just a polo." Plus, distributors can tout that caps offer bang for a client's buck, creating many impressions for an inexpensive price. This point is especially well made when pitching business clients who sell caps to customers. "A hat in a gift shop might start at \$19.95, but let's say you can get that client the cap for \$6 to \$10 and it's getting worn over and over ... you're creating a wealth of value," says Danny Friedman, vice president of Illinois based Added Incentives, who notes distributors should package caps as add-ons to customers interested in apparel. "You put a cap and shirt together and that becomes a nice gift with higher perceived value," says Adrian Sasine, marketing director at The Ice Box (asi/229395).

Offering customized caps is another way to increase value. "If you make the hat as customized as possible, it makes the competition go away because you can't be shopped," says Friedman. "It puts you in a better light with your clients because it shows you're hard-working, creative and provide personalized service."

Q: Who has the biggest ball cap collection?

A: Roger “Bucky” Legried of Frost, MN. His collection of more than 90,000 caps fills two tractor trailers.

History’s Tip of the Cap

How did the ball cap become the everyday headwear choice of America? Follow the timeline.

1950s

It was in the 1950s that men started going hatless. A variety of influences could have triggered the trend. Elvis and other heartthrobs of the era popularized the pompadour hairstyle, the slick and stylized look that would be ruined by a hat. John F. Kennedy’s decision to forgo headwear (he was known as “Hatless Jack”) was a factor as well. Television showed actors hatless during indoor scenes, possibly sparking emulation among the masses. Increased car ownership might have had a role, too. “Fedoras would bump on the car’s ceiling; they weren’t practical,” says Paul Lukas, ESPN.com columnist and creator of the sports uniform blog Uni Watch.

As those fedoras were being shelved, the groundwork for the ball cap’s ascent was being laid. In small towns across America, growing numbers of kids were playing Little League and Babe Ruth League Baseball. Many young sluggers – and sometimes coaches – began wearing their team caps off the field. “This got the ball cap more into everyday culture at a time when wearing hats was dropping off,” says James Lilliefors, author of the book *Ball Cap Nation*.

1960s and 1970s

The birth of the promotional hat: feed stores, farm equipment suppliers and automotive businesses began giving away plastic mesh hats with snapbacks and foam fronts that featured a company logo. Dubbed “gimme caps” or “trucker caps,” the inexpensive giveaways caught on, especially in rural America. Some companies began selling them. Says Lilliefors, “John Deere’s cap sales increased about 40% a year in the mid ’70s.”

1980s

The popularity of the ball cap exploded exponentially thanks to star power like actor Tom Selleck, who wore a Detroit Tigers baseball cap in the popular TV series *Magnum P.I.* “He was the first sex symbol to wear a ball cap as a fashion item,” says Lilliefors, noting other leading men began popping up in caps. “Men wanted to be associated with the look.” Additionally, sports television, which had been growing through the ’60s and ’70s, erupted to unprecedented levels in the 1980s, contributing to the cap’s rise as fans sought to identify themselves with their larger-than-life big league heroes. “When people wear a team’s cap, they’re pledging allegiance to the team,” says Shieber.

During the 1980s, New Era led the mass merchandising of officially sanctioned MLB caps, which sold in droves. In the same decade, says Lilliefors, the *Top Gun* movie (1986) and nationalistic sentiment stirred during the Reagan administration sparked popular taste for the so-called “patriotic” cap, a ball cap with a military theme, such as the name of a Navy battleship.

1990s and 2000s

By this time, caps had gone well beyond baseball and feed store promotions. Styles and designs had diversified; apparel companies, musical acts, corporations and colleges wanted caps to carry their brand. Part of the branching out into pop culture was led by hip-hop artists and alternative rock bands who, in the late '80s and early '90s, began wearing caps to signify a counter culture rebelliousness accentuated by turning the cap backwards or to the side. "It's a look that echoes throughout pop culture," says Tom Shieber, senior curator at the National Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum. These days, caps tilted to the side or turned backward are worn on-field by big league baseball players and Nflstars standing on the sidelines. "Wearing the cap askew," Lukas says, "has filtered back to the pros."

In the 1990s, retailers Lids and Hat World emerged to feed the domestic craving for caps, with Hat World eventually buying Lids. Through mass marketing and merchandising as well as the increased globalization of American pop culture, the trend of cap wearing spread to other countries. Nowadays, it's common to see Scandinavian snowboarders in ball caps with skateboarding logos, English soccer hooligans in checkered Burberry ball caps and Tokyoites in New York Yankees' authentics. Even Hamas, an Islamist political party in the Gaza Strip, has ball caps. Says Lukas, "Years ago when they won the election they wore green baseball caps with their message on it."