

## Ready-to-Wear Report

## Companies Try to Help Employees With Rising Fuel Costs

By Rosemary Feitelberg

Some retailers and vendors are trying to lessen the sting of soaring oil and gas prices, offering their employees incentives to carpool, take mass transit and bike or even walk to work.

As analysts predict oil prices could hit \$150 a barrel and gas sells at a record \$4.11 a gallon nationally, L.L. Bean is leading the charge with new initiatives.

In the past month or so, 1,300 of L.L. Bean's 5,000 worldwide employees have signed up for ECO Bean, a new employee commuting option program that makes participants eligible for gasoline gift cards, GPS devices, bicycles and other gift certificates. Carpoolers get priority parking at the company's Freeport, Maine, headquarters and more designated spots have been needed because of the program's popularity. In L.L. Bean's call centers, the company has a new scheduling plan to match up carpoolers.

L.L. Bean recently offered telecommuting as an option for its information technology department, and this summer at its factory in Brunswick, Maine, staffers are working a 40-hour, four-day week instead of a five-day week to reduce their commutes and, presumably, L.L. Bean's overhead expenses. That schedule may become more permanent, spokeswoman Laurie Brooks said.

"As long as employees are asking for it, we want to be sure we're listening to them, and offering things they need and they want to make changes," she said. "As long as we're still meeting quotas, why not? It's better for the environment, too."

L.L. Bean is exploring the possibility of negotiating with a supplier to get gas or heating oil discounts for its employees for limited periods. An education program that will help staffers make their homes more energy-efficient is under way. Well aware that 80 percent of Maine houses are heated with oil, and many of them are old, drafty houses, Brooks said, "We are going to have some employees faced with challenges."

About six weeks ago, Gramicci, an Agoura Hills, Calif.-based outdoor lifestyle apparel manufacturer, launched Drive Less - BBWC, a program that encourages commuting by bike, bus, walking or carpool (thus, the acronym). Staffers jot down on their weekly time cards or BBWC sheets the number of days they practiced those commuting alternatives and accrue days to earn gift certificates for Gramicci.com, stores and restaurants, or additional paid vacation days. Eighty percent of the company's 32 employees are participating so far, said Marty Weening, president of Gramicci.

One unexpected benefit has been the increased camaraderie and brainstorming that have stemmed from the carpooling, Weening said. Another is the company's new urban biking collection, a 20-piece group of items designed for commuters.

Taking mass transportation is a given for New York-based Brooklyn Industries'



Carpoolers at L.L. Bean's Freeport, Maine, office.



Brooklyn Industries plugs biking.



staffers, but now the company is spreading the word about biking. Brooklyn Industries has introduced a T-shirt imprinted with "More Bike Lanes" in its nine stores, including its newest in Chicago's Buckhead neighborhood. In September, they will be sold in Brooklyn Industries' new store at 803 Broadway near Union Square. A designer who is a diehard about biking to the brand's offices in the Brooklyn Navy Yard — rain or shine — came up with the idea. Ten percent of sales of the \$32 T-shirts will benefit Recycle a Bike, a group that refurbishes old bicycles and donates them to children.

The company also just introduced a "Brooklyn" T-shirt where the wheels of a bicycle are designed in the two Os. "We are very aware of biking [as an alternative means of transportation] in terms of our design," said co-founder Lexy Funk, who has used bicycles in store window displays to remind shoppers of a greener lifestyle.

At Bogner of America Inc.'s offices in Newport, Vt., employees who show proof of purchasing a vehicle that gets at least 33 miles a gallon will receive a bonus of \$500. The vehicle must be registered to a current staffer, who has worked at the company for at least two years. However, anyone who leaves BOA within a year after receiving the \$500, must pay back the bonus or have it deducted from their final paycheck.

Columbia Sportswear Co., based in Portland, Ore., will pay for employees' annual passes for TriMet public transportation (bus and light rail). In addition, carpoolers get preferential parking and staffers can use bike racks and shower facilities for those who cycle to work. About 12 percent of the company's 625 staffers use TriMet at some time during the week, another 12 percent carpool, 3 percent bike to work and 1 percent hoof it.