

DESIGN 2004

# Isaac Hits His Target

country and annual sales of about \$37 billion, the Mizrahi deal helped solidify its position as the alternative to Wal-Mart, a place for people who believe that quotidian life holds satisfactions beyond getting the lowest price on paper towels. Target's self-proclaimed mission is to "wow" and "delight" its "guests" (otherwise known as "customers") with the discovery that a product that virtually defines utilitarianism—a toilet-bowl brush, say—can be appreciated as an object, and even give pleasure with its design. The paradoxical term for this business model is "upscale discounter," and over the past five years, says Christine Au-

**First Graves, now Mizrahi. How this \$37 billion seller of soap and diapers has succeeded—and failed—at bringing high-end design to the masses.**

BY MARK MILLER AND JERRY ADLER



IF YOU WERE WONDERING WHAT world-famous fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi has been up to lately, the place to look was the 2003 Iowa State Fair. There, in mid-August, amid the prize-winning hogs and corn-dog stands, any woman up to a size 16 might have suddenly found herself pressed into service as an amateur mannequin: hustled into a trailer and relieved of her blue jeans to emerge before



**FUNCTIONAL STYLE:** Isaac Mizrahi (right) brings fashion to the Iowa State Fair. Michael Graves's gadgets on display in a Brooklyn store.

the dazzled multitudes in Mizrahi's dark stone-denim slacks and raspberry-smoothie-colored striped turtleneck. Even factoring in the cost of letting the women keep the clothes (priced from \$9.99 to \$69.99), this introduction saved tens of thousands of dollars for Mizrahi's new partner, Target Stores, compared with the cost of staging a show in Milan or even New York. And it sent an important message to Target's chic-starved customers in 47 states. The message was: *buy these clothes and you'll never have to worry that they looked so much better on the runway—because they've never been on one.*

For the Brooklyn-born Mizrahi, creating inexpensive women's clothing for Target is a way to test his theory that one can have an impact on fashion even without making a \$20,000 dress that gets worn once at the Emmys. He hopes to accomplish it on the backs of the humble millions who just want something nice to wear to work for under \$50. For the Minneapolis-based Target, with 1,200 stores around the



**VIRGIN PULSE:** TV/DVD in one

gustine, a senior analyst with Bear Stearns, "they have been hugely successful at it."

The effort began in 1998, when Target burst on the national scene by helping to sponsor the renovation of the Washington Monument. In a flash of inspiration it chose architect Michael Graves to design the construction scaffolding, which he did in his trademark cerulean blue. In the happy aftermath, Graves was invited to bring his postmodern esthetic—clean-lined but never severe—to Target's housewares line. At that time, a Target executive estimates, at least 70 percent of its customers had no idea who Graves was. Among his first offerings was a whimsical, beehive-shaped teakettle, a cousin to the iconic version he had designed in 1985 for the Italian manufacturer Alessi. (The Alessi version now sells for \$124; Target's model is priced at \$19.99.) With nearly two dozen designers in his firm devoted to servicing Target, Graves—who

*"The designs are stylish but not extreme, and most of the effort went into ergonomics and functionality. Designers noticed that runners, for example, were strapping their CD players to their left hands but reaching across their bodies to reach the buttons with their right. The design they came up with puts the buttons within easy reach of the hand that holds the case."*

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