

Stylists: Palin's fashion buys worth it

By SARAH ABRUZZESE | 10/23/08 4:36 AM EDT

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Sarah Palin's transformation was worth it, image consultants say.
Photo: AP

Jane the Plumber probably can't afford a \$150,000 shopping spree at Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys and Bloomingdale's, but professional stylists and image consultants say it's money well spent for Sarah Palin.

Politico reported Tuesday that the Republican National Committee has popped for more than \$150,000 worth of clothes and accessories for Palin and her family since John McCain tapped her as his VP pick in late August.

It's a huge number — more than Palin's \$108,000 annual salary as Alaska's governor — and news of it has brought a firestorm of criticism from Democrats who say it exposes Palin as a fraud, Republicans who wonder why their campaign contributions went for fashion, pundits who wring their hands about Neiman Marcus tastes in a Wal-Mart economy and legal experts who say the clothes might be treated as taxable income when the Palins file their next 1040.

The only ones not complaining: people who do this sort of thing for a living.

"She is dressing appropriately for the job she is going after," said **Lauren Rothman**, a Washington stylist and the principal in the fashion consulting firm Styleauteur.

Palin — and those responsible for her image — faced a unique challenge in the early days of the McCain-Palin ticket: How do you introduce a virtual unknown — a self-proclaimed "hockey mom" — as both a down-to-earth girl next door and a "maverick" prepared to become the leader of the free world?

Betsy Fisher, the owner of the eponymous clothing store in Dupont Circle, says Palin and her people managed to straddle the line. "She does not look like she is wearing particularly expensive clothes," Fisher said. "She looks like you could be her, too."

Los Angeles-based image consultant Patsy Cisneros, a part owner of Political Icon, which works with candidates running for higher office, said Palin's transformation was done well on a short timeline.

"She did come on the scene as governor for Alaska and looked appropriate as governor," Cisneros said. Now, as the election nears and the possibility of the vice presidency looms, "She is being seen not just locally but globally, and she needs to represent our country. She has to look appropriate for that."

And as for the Palin family makeover being charged to the campaign, Cisneros said it isn't unusual. "We've worked with candidates before who have money to spend — some of it was their own, and some of it was from the party. It was put in under so many different ways. You would be surprised what money gets spent."

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Colleen Abrie, a "head-to-toe stylist" and image consultant in the San Francisco bay area, said that it is "important to note that you are talking about branding a person who you are launching into the public eye."

"It is a good thing she has all that Armani, she needs all the points in her favor that she can get," Abrie said. "If you are looking the part, you are halfway there."

In a piece predating the current controversy, Washington Post fashion writer Robin Givhan called Palin's VP style "exceptionally ordinary," with "no detail" announcing that she's in charge or wants to be.

"In the narrow confines of political style," Givhan wrote last month, "the accepted rule is to dress in a manner that implies empathy for one's constituency — so don't wear anything too expensive — but also conveys authority. Palin has embraced the former and utterly ignored the latter."

Or maybe she's ignored both.

According to financial disclosure forms, the RNC spent \$75,000 at Neiman Marcus in Minneapolis, \$49,000 at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York and smaller amounts at others upscale department stores.

Neiman Marcus did not return calls from Politico, and Saks declined to discuss the matter.

This isn't the first time eyebrows have been raised over the price of McCain-Palin fashion. In July, the Huffington Post had a field day with reports that John McCain wore \$520 Ferragamo loafers. And in September, Vanity Fair said that Cindy McCain had worn about \$300,000 to the Republican convention — \$3,000 for an Oscar de la Renta dress and hundreds of thousands more for the diamonds and pearls that went with it.

Rothman estimated that Michelle Obama's usual campaign outfits are worth about \$2,000 each. Barack Obama accepted the Democratic presidential nomination in a custom-made Hartmarx suit, and the Chicago Sun-Times says he's bought five more of them since. Retail price: about \$1,500 each.

The Obama campaign says that "neither the Obama campaign nor the DNC have ever bought clothes for any of the Obamas or the Bidens."

The RNC, meanwhile, says essentially the same thing. An RNC official told Politico Wednesday that the Palins will have to return all of the items that were purchased for them — and that the RNC will then turn them over to charity — no matter who wins the presidential election.

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