

## Americans clamoring for all things Obama



Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times

Shahiem Smith runs a T-shirt stand on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Los Angeles and says that business has been very good since the election.

### Entrepreneurs are cashing in as items featuring President-elect Barack Obama have become a sales phenomenon.

By Alana Semuels >>>  
November 12, 2008

Much as Barack Obama has kindled unprecedented interest in presidential politics, so too has he prompted a flood of merchandise, collectibles, television deals and book contracts.

Presidents have always inspired such capitalism. But marketing experts say the historic nature of this election and the strong brand that the Illinois senator's campaign cultivated have sparked incredible demand for all things Obama.



Photos: Barack Obama merchandise

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"It's the biggest thing for publishing since Harry Potter," said Dermot McEvoy, a senior editor at Publishers Weekly, an industry trade journal.

The effects of Obamamania are trickling down. Vendors have taken to the streets and the Internet to sell Obama-themed T-shirts, buttons, bobblehead dolls, coffee mugs, wine bottles, magnets, greeting cards, neon signs, mobile phones and framed art prints. Despite worries about the economy, consumers are snapping them up.

"This is phenomenal -- I've never seen anything like it in my life," said Edward Robert El, 64, a street vendor in downtown Los Angeles. He sold more than 3,000 buttons featuring photos of Obama and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

He was selling the buttons, which cost him 80 cents apiece, for \$3 on Friday outside the Los Angeles Times, where crowds were lined up seeking copies of the Nov. 5 edition. The Times is one of many newspapers nationwide that [sold out their usual press run](#) and are now looking to cash in by selling commemorative copies.

There are at least nine books about the president-elect and the 2008 campaign coming out in the next few months, McEvoy said, including "The Obama Menu: Dinners With Barack Obama" and "Deciding the Next Decider: The 2008 Presidential Race in Rhyme."

Some journalists covering the campaign have struck deals for books about Obama, including Newsweek magazine White House correspondent Richard Wolffe and Time magazine senior political analyst Mark Halperin, and more are expected.

PublicAffairs, a New York publishing house that focuses on political books, will release "A Long Time Coming: The Historic, Combative, Expensive and Inspiring 2008 Election and the Victory of Barack Obama," by Evan Thomas and the staff of Newsweek, and will reprint a paperback version of a book co-written by Rahm Emanuel, Obama's new chief of staff.

"People are interested in Obama and his victory in a distinctly unusual way," PublicAffairs founder Peter Osnos said.

The TV business is getting in on it. Two days after the election, HBO announced that it had acquired an untitled documentary about Obama's campaign that was produced by actor Edward Norton's production company, Class 5 Films.

There are undoubtedly more video compilations of Obama's campaign events and speeches to come, said Peter Sealey, professor of marketing at Claremont Graduate University.

CafePress.com, which sells T-shirts and other merchandise designed by its users, says it offers 2.8 million different Obama-related items, including "That One Won" T-shirts and "Dream Realized" tote bags.

That's almost three times as many products as were created for Obama's opponent, Republican John McCain, said Amy Maniatis, vice president of marketing for San Mateo, Calif.-based CafePress.

"This is the biggest Nov. 5 we've ever seen in our company's history," she said. "Obama really captured folks' imagination from the very beginning."

Jennifer Funderburk, who makes her living [selling items](#) through CafePress, pulled in \$30,000 from Obama- and election-related gear in June around the Democratic National Convention. The day after the election, the Tampa, Fla., entrepreneur processed 96 orders for "Yes We Did!" shirts and other Obama-related products. She said the high demand was in "stark contrast" to that for John Kerry items in 2004.

From a street vendor, Los Angeles city employee Judy Forbes Williams bought an "Obama '08" hat for her daughter and a T-shirt adorned with the faces of Obama and King. "We want to say we were alive in '08," she said.

Obama collectibles may not be as valuable as some are hoping, said Neil Machander, past president of the American Political Items Collectors. Members of his association will be looking for buttons and shirts from the campaign, not things made afterward, and they won't pay a lot for Obama items if there is a surplus. Campaign items for John F. Kennedy, for instance, sell for only a few dollars because so many of them were made. Still, Obama souvenirs do have some added cachet.

"He's the first minority president -- it's not just the usual humdrum election," Machander said.

Obama gear is selling faster than Kwantavis Beavers expected. He and his uncle, who usually sells shirts outside Staples Center on Lakers game days, bought, wholesale, a few hundred Obama T-shirts and hats and started selling them in downtown L.A. The men thought they might make a few hundred bucks, but Beavers said they made \$1,500 on Friday alone, and brisk sales continued through the weekend.

Obama's election made the nation's highest office a little easier to merchandise, said George Whalin, president of Carlsbad firm Retail Management Consultants. Obama is a "unique entity among a group of pretty boring white men," he said, which makes the president-elect a unique product to sell -- even to people who don't much feel like spending.

"Any time you create buzz and excitement, it doesn't matter what the economy does," Whalin said.

Samuels is a Times staff writer.