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Lionel Richie Has Some Bedding to Sell You

“I’m in the bedroom,” Mr. Richie said, referring to his many romantic songs. “At least use my sheets.”

By Elizabeth Holmes

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Credit: Alex Welsh for The New York Times

On a recent, sticky August afternoon, Lionel Richie stepped onto the second-floor landing of the rotunda in J.C. Penney’s corporate headquarters in Plano, Tex., and surveyed its employees gathered above and below him. Microphone in hand, he bellowed: “My people!”

Mr. Richie is a four-time Grammy winner, with over 100 million records sold, so he counts a lot of people as “his” people. Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers danced with him during his “Brick House” days with the Commodores, then swayed to his “Endless Love” serenades when he went solo. Younger fans may know him [as a judge on “American Idol,”](#) or as father to Nicole, Miles and Sofia.

Now, he has the undivided attention of a new fan: J.C. Penney, the struggling department store where Mr. Richie is introducing his new home goods collection.

That’s right. Lionel Richie, the 69-year-old multiplatinum singer-songwriter, is debuting a line of sheets and towels, which will be available in stores beginning Sept. 7. With his entourage and a camera crew in tow, he made a three-hour stop at the J.C. Penney campus, where he tried to excite the sellers of his black satin comforters and gold-embroidered pillowcases by, among other things, handing out two bouquets of roses and crashing a meeting of the board of directors.

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The grand finale was the gathering in the rotunda. As the initial applause and cheers died down, Mr. Richie leaned on the wooden railing and shook his head, almost laughing.

“This is absolutely insanity,” he said.

Which is what you may be thinking, too. An explanation is forthcoming, but first the puns: *Hello, is it zzzs you’re looking for?* After a night of *Dancing on the Ceiling*, you can climb under this comforter and sleep *All Night Long*. Mr. Richie, once a *Penny Lover* is now a Penneys lover — and he’s coming for your linen closet.

“I’m in the bedroom,” Mr. Richie said, referring to his many romantic songs. “At least use my sheets.”

Celebrities sell stuff because it works.

To understand how we got to a place where we could collectively climb into bed with Lionel Richie, consider the threadbare, well-worn path of celebrity merchandising. Many stars have product lines; some simply license their names, while others are intimately involved in design.

Stores often demand the right to exclusively sell these product lines in order to ensure a lock on each celebrity’s fan base.

Pop stars tend to gravitate toward creating their own clothing and accessories lines, where a few oft-cited individuals have had considerable success (see: Jessica Simpson and Victoria Beckham).

Home goods make sense for the Rachael Rays and Martha Stewarts of the world, but it is something of a new frontier for musicians, and a strategic one. The category attracts a broader customer base, with looser ties to age or a gender, and presents much less fashion risk. A set of sheets can sit on a store shelf for months. A strong-selling towel can stick around for years.



e Lionel Richie's bedding line will be displayed in J.C. Penney stores with a cardboard cutout of the aging singer to encourage shoppers to take selfies.

Facing declines in traffic, department stores like J.C. Penney are betting on star power to attract shoppers. Before hitting the sheets with Mr. Richie, J.C. Penney carried bedding collections from the actress Eva Longoria and the model Cindy Crawford. It also plans to sell bedding by Ayesha Curry, a foodie and the wife of the N.B.A. player Stephen Curry, this fall.

The store is especially excited about Mr. Richie's line, which will be manufactured by Sobel Westex, the Las Vegas-based textile manufacturer behind Sleep Like a King, the bedding collection by Larry King and his wife, Shawn.

Executives see a strong correlation between the core J.C. Penney shopper — a woman over the age of 45 — and Mr. Richie. His **E-Score**, a ranking of a celebrity's marketability from **E-Poll Market Research**, is a near-perfect 98 out of 100. Nine out of 10 people over the age of 55 recognized his name, and 97 percent said they liked him.

Among the top attributes women assigned to him were “talented” and “good energy.” It's not far off from Mr. Richie's own sense of his brand, which he says is love. To guys, he is a musical wingman; to ladies, a swoony crooner.

J.C. Penney could use some good energy after its most recent earnings report, which sent its stock plunging. Katheryn Burchett, the chain's senior vice president of merchandising for home, said Mr. Richie's collection fills an aesthetic void in its assortment, pointing to the already strong online sales for the black-and-gold satin-like three-piece comforter set, on sale for \$149.99.

“We really want to reach out to his fans that may not have been in a J.C. Penney store for a while and get them to come in,” Ms. Burchett said.

Lionel Richie loves home goods. Don't act so surprised.

If you're still thinking, “Home goods? Really?” that's O.K. Mr. Richie's friends have said the same thing. “I'm actually enjoying this,” he said.

From an ornate sitting room in his home in Beverly Hills, Calif., Mr. Richie explained it further. “I was desperately trying to get the next hit record,” he said, when he reached a point of wanting something new, an additional outlet for his creative energy.

He had his team reach out to Walter Pelaez, the chief executive of Sobel, and they had dinner together at Mr. Richie's house on Valentine's Day in 2017. There, “the magic started,” Mr. Pelaez recalled. They spent all night long — just kidding, it was more like several hours — talking through the possibilities.

Celebrities are infusing the otherwise stale design landscape with a much-needed newness, Mr. Pelaez said, so he came to Mr. Richie's house already intent on sealing the deal. For a musician to be thought of, his or her song has to be playing on the radio — a fleeting moment.

But sheets and towels are a permanent reminder, a particularly intimate connection. “It’s in your bedroom, it’s in your bathroom, it’s touching your body,” Mr. Pelaez said.

Mr. Richie said that interior design has been a hobby of his since he bought his home two decades ago. He performs roughly 70 live shows around the world each year and takes respite from the road by decorating his own space.

He collects sizable souvenirs from his travels, like the piece of the Berlin Wall in his backyard. Now, those same adventures inform his product design.

The J.C. Penney bed and bath line is the beginning of what Mr. Richie sees as a much bigger lifestyle brand, Lionel Richie Home, with more categories to come. It’s his second attempt in home goods; in 2016 he hosted a dinner party to introduce a higher-priced offering of glassware and china.

That collection had limited distribution, according to a spokesman. The concept will be reimaged at more affordable prices in the future.

“I happen to stand every night in front of my customer. It’s called my fans,” Mr. Richie said. He appeals to people looking for quality and value. Their questions are practical: “How much is it going to cost?” and “Is it going to last after the third washing?”

His current line will be merchandised alongside color-coordinated pieces from J.C. Penney’s own label. If a shopper buys a Lionel Richie Home six-piece white-and-black towel set, on sale for \$39.99, she could pick up a few solid black towels from J.C. Penney’s line to coordinate. The intermingling of brands was intentional: It ensures both parties are invested in the success of the other.

The in-store setup that will be featured at 250 locations includes three photos of Mr. Richie: a head shot over each of the display beds and — the pièce de résistance — a life-size cardboard cutout of Mr. Richie standing between the two. The hope is that shoppers will see it as a selfie moment.

Mr. Richie certainly did. During his visit to J.C. Penney headquarters, he jumped on stage unprompted to pose for pictures with his cardboard self. Later, in the rotunda, Mr. Richie declared that he would change the way people think about selling. “The only way to do that is you have to do something slightly ridiculous,” he said.

It always helps to have a sense of humor.

Indeed, rather than run from the jokes, Mr. Richie joins them. The merchandise booth in Las Vegas, where Mr. Richie has a residency at Planet Hollywood until October, for example, sells mugs that read, “Hello, is it tea you’re looking for?”

It’s funny, and serves a purpose. At the J.C. Penney headquarters, when an employee inquired about his dinner plans, he said: “We’re going to sell a lot of sheets and pillowcases with that attitude right there, my dear.”

“In life, there’s only one great bridge to the other side,” Mr. Richie said. “That is a sense of humor.” He sees it as a path toward relevance, and relevance as an alternative to retirement.

This fandom keeps him in the mix, Mr. Richie added, rattling off the admirers he often hears about: “My mama, my daddy, my cousin, my brother, my sister, my aunt *loves you*.” That fan base has to translate, he said. “Somebody is going to buy a towel and hopefully a sheet.”

“I would buy anything for Lionel Richie,” said Lisa Stewart, a 49-year-old mother of three from Lexington, Ky, who was attending Mr. Richie’s Las Vegas concert one Saturday evening. She had already shelled out hundreds of dollars for V.I.P. passes in celebration of her coming birthday.

Although she is a lifelong J.C. Penney shopper — her husband was wearing pants from the chain to the concert — Ms. Stewart had not heard of Mr. Richie’s bedding line. The possibility excited her. (Later, in an email, she said she saw pieces online and loved them all.)

On this particular summer night, Ms. Stewart was part of a crowd that drew people from San Diego and San Antonio, Illinois and Arkansas. For a little less than two hours, a few thousand people stood, if and when they were able, swaying and smiling.

Mr. Richie is a performer as much as he is a singer, cracking dad jokes in between his tried-and-true songs. “There’s a portion of your life when you realize that you got more years behind you than you do in front of you, so you’re not ashamed,” he said, taking a beat as the crowd laughed, “of telling your children, ‘Just get out of my face for a minute.’”

At another point, he pretended that a drink that was handed to him by a crew member was filled with something strong. (It was Pedialyte).

Around 10 p.m., after “Easy (Like Sunday Morning),” “We are the World” and every other Lionel Richie song you maybe forgot he sang, the show was over. He walked offstage, shed his blue sequined “All Night Long” jacket and climbed into a black S.U.V., waiting to take him to his private plane.

Lionel Richie was going home to sleep in his own bed.



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