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The Measure of a Man

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A Brioni made-to-measure suit in progress. The customer has chosen from hundreds of fabrics and a menu that includes lapels, button stance, style and slant of pockets, vents, cuffs and linings.

Photo By Doug Rosa



Made-to-measure tailoring by Ermenegildo Zegna.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

Made-to-measure clothing—a close cousin to bespoke tailoring, which has been around for centuries—is suddenly on the fashion industry’s hot list. Despite global economic malaise, the category has made a quantum leap as male luxury shoppers turn from trendy indulgence to individuality and value.

In a sense, these consumers have come full circle. Until the Industrial Revolution, all suits were custom made. But by the mid-1800s, with the introduction of the ready-made suit, men began to embrace the ease and convenience of off-the-rack garments. And, for the most part, they never looked back—until now. For some of the most celebrated suit labels, the current decade appears to mark a turning point. At Ermenegildo Zegna, made-to-measure sales grew 31 percent in 2010, accounting for 9 percent of the company’s total volume, which recently passed \$1 billion. Hickey Freeman’s made-to-measure business, now 20 percent of the brand’s total, is up 38 percent year to date. Even Giorgio Armani, a more fashion-driven designer brand, saw a 10 percent spike in the category during the first half of this year.

Zegna, a made-to-measure pioneer, has expanded its program to offer 700 fabrics and recently introduced a Virtual Try On app that enables customers to preview their purchase. Chief executive officer Gildo Zegna notes “a marked tendency focused toward personalized product” among consumers not just in North America but also in Europe, China, India and South America, all places in which Zegna keeps expanding its retail presence. The company’s new 3-D online store, in *_STORE*, unveiled in June during the Paris men’s collections, offers no made-to-measure. But that could change.

“Made-to-measure requires meeting our tailor,” says Zegna, citing that as the reason the program hasn’t been available at Zegna in_STORE. “But we are currently evaluating introducing this in the near future.” Twenty-first-century technology might seem incongruous with an approach to suit making that suggests the quality and tradition of a bygone era. But made-to-measure itself is a relatively modern twist on bespoke or custom tailoring. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, there are distinct differences. Unlike a custom-made suit, which starts with a pattern that’s made from scratch, a made-to-measure garment relies on a standard-size pattern, which is then adjusted to fit an individual. In both cases, the customer chooses fabric, lining, buttons, lapel width and other details that make up the end result: a one-of-a-kind garment with a beautiful fit.

Retailers have stepped up their efforts in this area as they look for more efficient approaches to inventory, as well as new ways to boost sales. A made-to-measure suit typically costs 20 percent more than its off-the-peg counterpart, but highly publicized events help overcome price resistance—and once a customer crosses over, he’s reluctant to go back. As a result, men’s stores have seen a surge in business with luxury labels ranging from Zegna, Brioni and Isaia to Hickey Freeman and Oxxford. Their made-to-measure suits start around \$2,000 and can go over \$30,000 for exclusive, super-luxurious fabrics and exceptional details.

“To say it’s important is an understatement,” says Tom Kalenderian, executive vice president and general merchandise manager of men’s wear for Barneys New York. “It’s a cornerstone of our business.”

Kalenderian, who has been at Barneys for more than three decades, notes that Fred Pressman, the store’s legendary former owner, first ventured into made-to-measure as early as the 1960s. Since then, the segment has evolved as it expanded. “Twenty or 30 years ago, you sat with the head of a company, and they told you what to buy and how to buy it,” Kalenderian says. “Men today don’t have to be guided as much.”

Nor do they necessarily flock to the store’s trunk shows. “A one-day event is less meaningful in the life of a modern man, who is monopolized by his business and family schedule,” Kalenderian explains. “It might be good for introduction purposes, but we make [made-to-measure] available to clients when they need it. We grab swatches, a sales associate and a tailor, and go to their office, home, hotel room, wherever they want.”

On average, made-to-measure accounts for about 15 percent of tailored clothing sales at Barneys. The percentage is higher for luxury and traditional brands, and lower for contemporary labels, many of which don’t offer the service. But Kalenderian sees potential in this sector as well. “The ‘Mad Man’ wants his own version,” he says. This fall Barneys will launch exclusively a made-to-measure and off-the-peg collection from **Andrea Campagna**, the son of a Milanese custom tailor, aimed at the contemporary customer. “The silhouette is trim, and it’s soft enough to wear with a trouser or jean,” Kalenderian says. “[Campagna] is taking an antique custom and modernizing it for today’s man of style.”

Russ Patrick, senior vice president and general merchandise manager of men’s wear for Neiman Marcus, says made-to-measure business is outstripping off-the-rack sales at his stores, while tailored clothing as a whole is performing well. Suits from luxury labels such as Zegna, Brioni and Kiton account for the bulk of this business. Patrick notes that most of these suits are “boardroom style,” though a trend toward more “aggressive” fashion looks has emerged in recent years. “We also have a nice made-to-measure shirt

business,” he adds, “because that goes hand-in-hand. It’s mainly driven by the same customer.”

That customer’s profile has changed, however. “In the past, it was an older demographic,” Patrick says. “Now it’s a larger age range. What’s encouraging is that if he’s in his 30s or 40s, when he experiences made-to-measure once, he’ll likely continue to shop that way.”

Tom Ott, senior vice president and gmm of men’s for Saks Fifth Avenue, reports the same pattern. “Once they get a taste for it, they stick with it,” he says. “We have their measurements on file, so it’s pretty easy.”

At Saks, made-to-measure was “on fire” before the recession and has picked up again in the last year and a half, according to Ott. It now represents 20 percent of the store’s tailored clothing business, which includes labels such as Armani, Canali, Corneliani, Ralph Lauren and Zegna, as well as Saks’ private brand. Made-to-measure shirts and sport coats are “flourishing” as well, says Ott. “This also allows an extension of our inventory, especially where it comes to luxury fibers and fancy sport coats.”



Made-to-measure suit by Isaia.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

Ott expects the trend toward made-to-measure to continue.

“We think it will keep growing as a percentage of the business,” he says. “At the luxury level, the guy doesn’t need another suit,” but an upturn in preseason ordering suggests that customers enjoy the process. “And it’s all done at full price, so it’s very profitable for us,” he adds.

Brooks Brothers has put elements of made-to-measure into various programs, which collectively have been “explosive over the past couple of years,” according to Tom Jackson, manager of special services. A special-order program lets customers buying stock garments choose from a greatly expanded selection of fabrics. “There are some fit modifications, but mainly it’s just the fabric and details,” says Jackson. Suits from this program, called Suiting Essentials, retail for \$598 and up.

At the next level, the Select program for suits, sport coats and trousers offers even more fabric choices. These suits retail for about \$1,000, and the garments are made in America at the company’s Southwick factory in Haverhill, Mass., in about four weeks. Now the company is dedicating a line in its factory exclusively to customized products, with an eye toward reducing the turnaround time to three weeks. At the top tier is full-fledged made-to-measure, which allows the customer to choose from some 3,000 swatches and customize everything from silhouette and lining to the pockets and lapels. Most of these suits retail for about \$1,300, and a completely hand-tailored garment is \$1,600.

At the same time, the company has gone high-tech at its Madison Avenue flagship in New York, where an in-store scanner—a sort of digital tailor—takes a 3-D image of a body in just 12 seconds. This yields

hundreds of measurements that are electronically transmitted to the factory, which produces an individual pattern for the customer. A salesman then helps him select the fabric, model and details.

Together these programs represent 10 percent of Brooks' suit and shirt sales. "We're seeing a lot of growth at the Select level," says Jackson. "It's driven by guys in their 20s who are seeking to customize their wardrobes" at an entry-level price. But once they begin to appreciate the service, he adds, there's a "heavy migration to made-to-measure."

Other retailers attest to the trend as well. Bob Mitchell, co-president of the Mitchells Family of Stores, says the category was "the first thing to come out of the recession." Made-to-measure accounts for 40 percent of the business, compared to 15 percent a decade ago, and nearly 30 percent of the tailored clothing business. "It's very productive inventory," Mitchell says, "and a way to satisfy a customer who wants something unique."

Bill Cournoyer, vice president of clothing and furnishings for Bergdorf Goodman, observes that the made-to-measure customer tends to develop a rhythm, refreshing his wardrobe every 12 to 18 months. "Once you get the measurements correct, you're set," he says. "You and your salesman have a relationship that allows you to update your wardrobe whenever you want."

And the experience can be addictive: "Once bitten, you enjoy the whole process." Cournoyer notes, however, that classic brands such as Zegna and Brioni offer more flexibility than designer labels like Armani and Tom Ford. With a designer, he explains, "You can't redesign the garment."

Still, Giorgio Armani recently unveiled two new suit models with canvas construction—retailing for about 1,800 euros, or \$2,564—in the category, which is now 15 percent of its U.S. men's business. Although their shape is distinctively the designer's, the selection of fabrics leans toward the traditional, with patterns ranging from Prince of Wales to pinstripes, and vicuña wool serving as an especially luxurious option.



Made-to-measure suit by Pal Zileri.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

“I believe it is important to remember where fashion design started—with the desire to make beautiful clothes,” says the legendary designer. “This collection really does bring the traditional and the modern together, combining the origins of the tailor’s craft with innovations of the contemporary design studio.”

Armani isn’t the only brand stepping in with new products. This month Hugo Boss is launching Boss Selection Made-to-Measure in its stores in Frankfurt and Zurich, with a rollout planned for next year. And Kiton, whose made-to-measure program already generates nearly a quarter of its total sales, is introducing a new model called LASA, a contemporary take on one of the Neapolitan brand’s oldest silhouettes. Its approach to tailoring is unusual. “The tailor doesn’t cut a model of the suit,” says chief executive officer Antonio De Matteis. “Instead, he designs it directly with chalk on the material based on the measurements.”

Isaia, also based in Naples, distinguishes itself with a lean, modern silhouette. Its high-waisted jackets have soft shoulders and medium-size lapels, and the trousers tend to be flat front. But individualism has emerged as a key selling point, according to president Gianluca Isaia. “Compared to a few years ago, customers are not happy with just buying a brand name but seek a unique piece that is personalized and of high quality,” Isaia says.

Patrizia Mastromauro, a brand manager at Pal Zileri, calls this trend “an expression of authentic luxury.” As he puts it, “In this globalized world, men are in constant pursuit of a personalized service and want to be cuddled and spoiled and made to feel special.”

But made-to-measure is not just for suits and shirts. Luxury brands are offering products as diverse as neckwear and shoes. In fact, Louis Vuitton recently named a new ambassador for its made-to-order shoe service, which will be offered in its Paris flagship beginning later this month.

American brands, too, are riding the crest of this wave. “We see more strength than ever before,” says Joe Blair, president and chairman of IAG, which produces custom shirts as well as Oxxford tailored clothing. Blair notes that made-to-measure has been IAG’s fastest-growing business during the first half of the year. “Retailers are not able to hang as many goods as they did before, so we’re seeing more event selling,” he adds.

“It makes you more important to the retailers you do business with,” says Mike Cohen, president of Hickey Freeman. “In many retailers, you won’t find peak lapels or ticket pockets, so [with made-to-measure] the guy looking for that can create his own suit.”

Not surprisingly, the market is also seeing an increase in made-to-measure garments at lower prices. Firms such as My.Suit, which offers a made-to-measure suit for \$495, and Sartoriani, which makes a wool-cashmere one for \$995, cater successfully to men not ready to plunk down, say, \$4,000 for a suit. Internet-based companies—such as Astor & Black, whose suits average \$895, and Indochino, whose suits sell for as low as \$300—have also joined the fray.

But luxury companies don't view these lower-price options as a threat. "It's good for the consumer at that price point, and anything that gets them to appreciate tailored clothing and the process is valuable," says Barneys' Kalenderian. "Maybe the next time, they'll move up."

Cohen of Hickey Freeman, agrees. "We don't see it as competition," he says. "In fact, we look at it as the best opportunity to grow the business. It brings men into the fold at an introductory price. But if they want an authentic experience, they come to us."

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