

Men's

Niche Brands Changing Face Of Men's Underwear Business

By Brenner Thomas

IF DIVERSITY IS THE HALLMARK of success, men's underwear is going gangbusters.

Once the home of a sprinkling of brands and even fewer styles, the men's underwear market continues to balloon as an onslaught of niche brands and seasonal releases from major players vie for the attention of male consumers suddenly surrounded by choice.

"It's increasing all the time," said Michael Kleinman, president of Freshpair.com, a leading innerwear retailer, of the category's explosion. "There's more happening in this business as new brands pop up and well-established ones come out with new collections."

To wit: Freshpair now offers 1,500 men's stockkeeping units from 57 brands — a 30 percent increase over two years ago. Virtually absent from the MAGIC marketplace a year ago, boutique underwear vendors now have



Papi is targeting the Hispanic market and Calvin Klein carries 15 underwear programs.

their own area at the men's wear show, where more than 20 brands exhibited this past February.

"It used to be really commodity-based," Joe DePiro, vice president of marketing at Isaco International, which produces Papi as well as licensed product from Perry Ellis and others. "But then fashion started to happen."

And it's not just fashion. The proliferation of brands and styles has been girded by twin beliefs: not every man wants the same underwear and all men have multiple underwear needs — performance for the gym, basics for work, trendier (or even gut slimming) styles for weekend. "Women's wear has had this concept of day and night in their intimates for decades but it's now applicable to the men's business," said Jason Scarlatti, creative director for 2xist, which launched a collection of evening-inspired underwear in January called Tux. "It's much more influenced by occasion dressing."

In the face of such diversity, the classic question — of whether a man is a boxers or briefs guy — misses the point. According to the new thinking, many guys are both.

The market is now ample enough to incorporate such obscure sounding ideas as men's shapewear — even Spanx has gotten into the market.

It's also allowed market leaders like Jockey and Calvin Klein to develop extensive portfolios of underwear programs, which they launch with splashy ad campaigns each season. Calvin Klein, which most recently introduced the X range with a celebrity-studded ad campaign, produces 15 underwear platforms at any given time, ranging from trendy styles with wide waistbands to active-inspired ranges like Pro Stretch. And for Calvin, whose underwear is produced under license by the Warnaco Group, the niche underwear business has room to grow. "The growth potential stems from the observation that most guys have yet to discover that there are multiple types of underwear for places like the gym or playing sports," said Bob Mazzoli, chief creative officer for the brand's underwear division, which has successfully followed a seasonal launch strategy for more than a decade.

Jockey has adopted a similar, though less splashy, approach to its product offering. The brand now carries 12 programs from updated basics to the active-inspired Go line to its latest release, Sport Performance Stretch, marketed to hard-core athletes.

Even Hanes, king of the commodity underwear business, has been influenced by the move toward trendier and more varied styles. The packaging and advertising focuses on the brand's latest product innovations — often comfort-oriented improvements — like its cotton-wrapped waistband.

"There is always something new to react to," said Jay Turner, vice president and general manager of men's underwear for Hanes, who acknowledged he follows underwear trends of his higher-priced competitors, and is particularly interested in men's shapewear and performance fabrics.

But growth of the men's wear market has not been supported by equivalent sales. Sales of men's underwear bottoms dropped 3.2 percent in 2008 and another 4.6 percent last year to \$1.82 billion, according to The NPD Group.

With more companies vying for a smaller pot, some brands are having to adjust to the competition.

"A few years ago product started looking very similar," said Kleinman. "I think the recession woke people up and made them realize they have to be distinct. It really comes down to how they differentiate themselves from what's out there."

Isaco is rationalizing some brands and targeting others to what it calls "underserved markets." The company is debuting 9Two, a new line geared to the skate and action sport market, and is retooling Papi for the Latin American market.

"Slices of the market — like the gay and contemporary niches — are oversaturated," said DePiro.

Papi is targeting the Latino market with product reflecting the flag colors of Latin American countries. The line is launching during Hispanic Heritage Month in September.

Issues of competition aside, the men's underwear executives feel the category has running room.

"It's a \$3 billion category," said Turner. "You don't have to be big to carve out a business and make some money. For Hanes, it makes it interesting to watch."

New York State Sen. Eric Adams has erected six billboards in Brooklyn.



PHOTO BY ROBERT MEDEA/AP PHOTO

Saggy Pants Debate Arises in New York

By David Lipke

OVER THE PAST TWO WEEKS, A SERIES of billboards has gone up in Brooklyn neighborhoods promoting an unusual fashion message: Guys, pull up your sagging pants. The advertisements are the work of New York State Sen. Eric Adams, who has launched a campaign to encourage young urban males to stop wearing their jeans and trousers so low that it shows off their underwear — an erstwhile streetwear trend that started amongst hip-hop fans in the Nineties and long ago expanded into the skater and suburban demographics.

The six billboards that have gone up in Brooklyn show two men in saggy jeans — their boxer shorts prominently on display — and the tag lines: "We are better than this!", "Stop the Sag!" and "Raise your pants, raise your image!"

Adams told WWD he is partnering with other New York state senators to expand the campaign to Queens and buy billboards in that borough, as well.

"The sagging pants culture represents an immature disregard for the basic civility, courtesy and responsibility that our young men should display," said Adams, who noted the trend was inspired by the loose, beltless look of prison garb.

However, those who work in the streetwear industry and cater to young urban males took a critical stance on the Adams campaign. "I like Sen. Adams, but this is wrong-headed and a waste of time," said Russell Simmons, the founder of Phat Farm and Argyle Culture. "This is the latest example of adults trying to repress the creativity and individuality of kids. Why would kids want to dress like Sen. Adams? There is no connection to saggy pants and the ability to succeed. Just look at what buttoned-up America has done to the rest of the world and each other. Why can't kids be different?"

Jeffrey Tweedy, vice president at Sean John, said he was supportive of the overall message, but believes Adams has unfairly targeted African-American males with the campaign.

"I wish he wouldn't focus on African-Americans and instead talk about all races," said Tweedy. "Many different people are involved with this trend. It's not just black kids. You can go to Washington Square Park and see skaters wearing tight Levi's in a similar way."

Tweedy also took issue with the alleged prison heritage of the saggy pants look. "This was a fashion statement. It was never a gang statement," explained Tweedy of the long-lasting trend.

Sean John has never promoted the saggy bottoms look, said Tweedy. "We are a sophisticated brand. I actually get offended when I see some stores style their mannequins with saggy jeans. But remember, this is about youthful rebellion. They are doing it to get

attention — there's a cool factor involved."

Jason Geter, who cofounded the upscale streetwear brand AKOO with hip-hop star T.I., was diplomatic in his response to the issue. "AKOO stands for A King of Oneself, so we certainly promote excellence," he noted. "We encourage all young men to carry themselves in a respectable manner to decrease the chances of being singled out or judged in society. When it comes to fashion, always remember to dress for the occasion."

The Adams campaign has engendered support from a number of his Senate colleagues, including Senate president Malcolm Smith. "The 'Stop the Sag' campaign promotes self-respect and fights self-imposed negative stereotypes of our youth in communities across the state," said Smith.

Adams said he's received thousands of calls and letters from constituents, with 95 percent of them favorable to his "Stop the Sag" campaign. A YouTube video of Adams talking about the initiative has received more than 95,000 hits, and the senator is aiming to expand ads to buses — funded by Adams and other senators' own campaign chests. "I'm targeting adults as well as kids. Young people always want to push traditional boundaries and adults need to tell them when they've gone too far," said Adams, who is asking New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein

to come up with a citywide standard of dress in public schools that would ban saggy pants that expose underwear.

The Adams initiative is the latest effort by lawmakers to curb the saggy jeans look. Over the years, legislators in places as diverse as Louisiana, Connecticut and Georgia have introduced bills to ban the fashion trend, with various outcomes.

Minya Quirk, co-founder of the Capsule trade show and the BPMW showroom, which represents youthful brands such as Stüssy, Penfield and Clae, said it's almost de rigueur for adults to get offended by youthful fashion trends. "There's something to be said for young people who invent their own fashion trends and find new ways to wear things. It makes people who are older angry," she observed. "But kids will be kids, and it's an expression of their youthfulness and not something they will stick with for the rest of their lives."

Even President Barack Obama has previously weighed in on the matter — coming down on the side of non-saggy pants. In an interview with MTV a week before his election win, he told viewers: "Here is my attitude: I think people passing a law against people wearing sagging pants is a waste of time....Having said that, brothers should pull up their pants. You are walking by your mother, your grandmother, your underwear is showing. What's wrong with that? Come on. There are some issues that we face, that you don't have to pass a law, but that doesn't mean folks can't have some sense and some respect for other people and, you know, some people might not want to see your underwear — I'm one of them."



