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A USERS' GUIDE TO LIFE

BY ANNE BRATSKER

Everybody kvetches about finding a decent bathing suit (it's tough), great jeans, a jacket that fits like a glove. But to be honest, nothing is as critical to most women as that ultimate wardrobe staple — pants.

There is nothing like a great pair of pants. They fit you perfectly; take you from running errands to the office to dinner; they're comfortable and, when truly perfect, even slimming. They're sturdy enough to go through three wearings without being dry-cleaned, yet fashionable and feminine enough to make you feel you're always dressed appropriately. Wear them a hundred times in different ways and not a soul will mention your repetitiveness.

But there's a problem. Perfect pants are hard to find, and the fashion industry knows it.

"There are just not that many marketers who do pants well," says Jeanne Sottile, vice president-divisional merchandise manager of contemporary sportswear at Bloomingdale's.

"I would say as a general statement that pants are actually the toughest garment to fit. There's a science when it gets to the pants and it's a very detailed construction process."

Miranda Kyriakides, chair-

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Express has sold more than 2 million pairs of its Editor pants.

Finding the perfect pants

Expert advice TV's Stacy London on some basic dos and don'ts

If it were up to Stacy London, the outspoken co-host of TLC's hit "What Not to Wear," (Fridays at 9 p.m.) we'd all be trashing a lot of our pants and replacing them with better fits for our bodies.

"Pants are one of the most important fashion items in your wardrobe and among the hardest to buy," says the former fashion editor and stylist, whose makeover advice for self-made fashion victims is often a tad vicious, but undeniably helpful.

Here's a little sage advice from the expert:

■ **Obvious don't:** "If there's any pull-

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advice

Finding perfect pants

PANTS from B44

woman of the pattern-making department at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan, agrees.

"Professionals who just make pants are nearly extinct. I get quite a few calls from people who want to manufacture pants and are not happy with what is out there. There is a definite problem."

Kyriakides teaches her students to pattern pants by "dealing with the real anatomy of the body. You need to know the proportions — front versus back, people with a little belly, with a rear that is a little fuller, etc."

A production problem

She says the markets' maze of ill-fitting pants has more to do with production than design. "Production is global and there are often multiple contractors who don't have much knowledge of our body parts here in the States. To make a bigger size, they randomly add to the waist, but the rest is not calculated out and it hangs on the body."

That said, there are great pants in the marketplace — you just have to work to find the style that fits you the best.

While it is unusual for a department store executive to single out one brand, Bloomingdale's Sottile does not hesitate. "Theory . . . puts the time and effort into the fit, construction and quality of fabrics. . . . The result is the single best pant in the market."

Andrew Rosen, president of the 7-year-old Manhattan-based company, is not surprised by the compliment. "A company has to choose what it's going to stand for, and the whole concept of how we started was by making great pants."

Fashion lore has it that Theory, now a blockbuster business with 15 stores and wide international distribution, began with five pairs of pants hanging on a wall for buyers to see.

"Instead of investing in advertising, I invested the money in a great technical team and great-fitting clothes," he says. Though Theory now offers a dozen or so pant styles, the most popular is the Max, a body-hugging trouser with a flared leg and back slit pockets.

Express Design Studio's Edi-



Andrew Rosen, president of Theory, says the company got its start making great pants.

tor pant is another good seller. Introduced in the summer of 2003, the black stretch wool pant was labeled "the best-fitting pant in America."

Success at Express

Consumers seem to agree. To date, Express claims to have sold more than 2.2 million pairs of the tailored, slightly low-rise style. This fall it comes in six fabrics, 15 solid colors, six stripes and five prints.

"It is the most successful single item of clothing in the history of the company," says company spokeswoman Pamela Seidman. "There is a huge loyalty to these pants, and women feel an emotional connection."

Los Angeles designer Trina Turk also speaks of her customers' emotional attachment to her pants. She produces about 10 styles a season, but her best-seller is the Leesa pant, a seasonless poly-viscose-Lycra number. It sits low on the waist — "low enough to look cool, but not so low that you expose yourself when you sit down," says the designer — has side

pockets, belt loops, a narrow cut through the thigh and slight flair at the bottom.

"There is massive loyalty to that pant," Turk says. "When a woman finds a pant that she likes the fit of, she'll travel far and wide for it."

Turk's secret weapon may be the unlikely fit model she has used for eight years. Says the designer, "she's not your typical skinny model. She has a beautiful figure, but she definitely has a booty."

Likewise, at Club Monaco, Melanie Fisher, a company spokeswoman, says, "We use a fit model that we feel represents an average woman's size and we focus on what will look best on that woman."

To that end, the company's Tex pant, marketed since spring 2003, is winning fans of all body types and is the company's most popular style. Says Fisher, "It's a modern update on the everyday, classic work trouser."

Anne Bratskeir is a regular contributor to Newsday.

The fit test

No matter what the gimmick or the hype, the bottom line on pants is how they fit you. So we road-tested some of the most touted brands.

Our shoppers — a 5-foot-8 size 8 and a 5-foot-4 size 12 — went on a pants rampage, trying on styles by five manufacturers. Overall, the cuts were contemporary (translation: slim), and only one brand went beyond size 12, which was sometimes problematic for our size 12. The pants ranged from \$58 to \$290.

Banana Republic: Both our testers loved Banana Republic's Martin fit. They have three styles

of fit, including the Harrison and Camden, that go from sizes 0 to 16. While company honchos wouldn't say which was the bestseller, a salesman indicated the Martin was the biggie. Easy tailoring, nice fabrics (a soft flannel stripe was divine), a wee bit of stretch and a lower, but not too low, waist. **Price:** \$78 to \$109, depending on the fabric

Theory: "Fabulous selection of colors and fabrics," said our size 12, who, despite the awe-inspiring variety of menswear-inspired tweeds, plaids, checks, soft corduroy and plush velvet, found the pant too slim. In fact, larger women probably

shouldn't bother, since Theory execs say they don't even sell that many size 12s, and admit the pants are cut slim, so you might want to size up. The best-selling Max was too clingy for our 8 — "too much tush cling" — but the loose-legged, low-rise, slouchy Preston model was tops with her. (She actually bought them.) **Price:** \$195 to \$290

Express: Evocative of much more expensive pants in this lean, modern silhouette, the size 12 was more impressed with the amazing assortment of colors and fabrics than the fit, which was "less flattering than some others." The size 8 said she might plunk down \$58 for a pair of these, but found the cut "a little short in the rise." **Price:** \$58 to \$128



Expert advice

ADVICE from B44

ing, wrinkling, puckering on the crotch going across the leg," forget it, she says, even if they do wonders for your behind.

■ **The universal best pant:** Look for a flat front, hook-and-eye-closure trouser, not wide-legged and not skin-tight. Start with the widest part of your body and go straight down from there, suggests London. "Avoid the ice-cream-cone effect," she says referring to a wide top that narrows pointedly. Her pet peeve is the "Mommy" pant, which sits too high on the waist and is "tapered to death on the leg. Doesn't flatter a single body type," she says.

■ **On trends:** "Don't buy into them. Buy into what works best on your body." But if you have to follow trends, here's a good one, says London: "The high waist is making its way back and it does tend to make you look taller and accentuates a smaller waist."

■ **On size:** "Size fluctuates from designer to designer. Understand the cuts that work best for your body type and don't let size be psychological torture." In other words, if you're an 8 in one pant and a 10 in another, forget about the size if the pant looks good.

■ **About fabrics:** Be careful of the weight of fabrics, warns London. "Heavy wool or tweed can create bulk when you don't need it." Similarly, fabrics that are too thin can be unflattering. Best case? Tropical-weight wool with a lining.

■ **Large sizes:** A good fit is even more important for a bigger body, says London. "Camouflage doesn't necessarily mean hiding. A big mistake for larger women is to wear oversized pants." Instead of opting for droopy drawers, London advises larger sizes to go for gentle curves around the tush. And if the pants you find fit everywhere except the waist, she notes that's the easiest thing to take in. That said, she adds, nothing is less flattering than too tight. "Take stock of what you've got. Understand your body. Be realistic about what's possible.

tush is, you need to look at the leg and balance that proportion." Meaning, legs should not be much wider or any narrower than the width of the backside, but instead, you should look for the appearance of a straight line down.

■ **Belly busters:** For women with hips or tummy, side zippers are less attractive, says the TV host. "Also, the high-waisted pant with a zipper in the back is a bad idea. Flat fronts are much more flattering on the body," she says.

■ **Short people:** The hardest body type for pants, generally petite sizes will fit

Club Monaco: Our size 12 really liked these — "they seemed to do a little something extra for my behind." The size 8 found the best-selling "Tex" pant had a too-wide leg and was a little unflattering because of pulling across the crotch. Both thought the pant was a good value. **Price:** \$109

Trina Turk: Trina Turk's pants fit the 8 quite well. She said they were "streamlined, hip, well-suited for work, very comfortable, with just the right amount of stretch and a good, long in-seam," but the size 12 found the pant "very narrow through the tummy." **Price:** \$170 to \$250 at Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom, Searle and specialty stores

— ANNE BRATSKAIR