

Stretch Bounces Back

Men Rejected It a Decade Ago, But Spandex Is Trying Again With More Savvy, Less 'Boing'

By TERI AGINS

FOR MOST AMERICAN MEN, stretch clothes have always been a stretch.

Menswear makers experimented with stretch fibers in the mid-1990s, weaving elasticized spandex into cotton shirts and woolen pants. They hoped men would follow the lead of their wives and girlfriends, who loved how a little spandex added body and give to fabrics and improved the comfort and fit of everything from pantyhose and T-shirts to jeans and suits.

But men wanted no part of it. The very mention of the word stretch makes most middle-aged men cringe, flashing back to John

Travolta's disco look in "Saturday Night Fever." Thoughts of tight-fitting double-knit polyester shirts and pants—too revealing of love handles and paunches—made many department-store buyers wary. "Stretch had a bad rap," recalls Jim Moore, creative director of GQ magazine.

What's more, the shirts produced in the earlier experiments with stretch didn't perform well. White stretch-cotton shirts were off-white. Hot-water washing or dry cleaning caused sleeves to shrink, and the stretch tended to disappear over time. Then there was that scratchy finish and the swish of swinging arms. "I wore the shirt, and it was noisy when you moved," admits Al Moretti, president of the designer group of Phillips Van Heusen Corp. The menswear company added stretch to some of its Geoffrey Beene dress shirts for about a year but phased it out around 2000. Other menswear brands pedaled away from stretch, too.

Now, thanks to advances in technology and a shift in fashion toward slim fits, stretch is returning. The addition of stretchy fibers to men's shirts, pants, suits and jeans adds something new and fresh to classic clothes, in the same way wrinkle-free and stain-resistant finishes helped revive sales of men's casual pants and dress shirts. The new fibers also give companies a reason to charge an extra 10% to 15% for basic staples. Van Heusen has launched Calvin Klein dress shirts with stretch, pricing them at \$49.50, or about \$5 higher than dress shirts without stretch.

Part of stretch's comeback is a vast improvement in fiber technology in recent years, so fabrics have less "boing"—the rubbery retractability that makes clothes clingy and turns many men off. Most men can't even tell that a garment has stretch until they flex an elbow or bend a knee and feel the fabric give.

"I wasn't even conscious of the stretch," says David Ziring, a Los Angeles physician, who recently bought two Calvin Klein stretch dress shirts to wear to his sister's wedding. "The shirts were very lightweight and comfortable when I tried them on, and they fit just like a regular dress shirt, except they have a little more give in the places where you bend."

Changes in fashion are also prodding men to get with the stretch program. Slimmer silhouettes, including flat-front pants, low-rise jeans and tapered, "modern fit" shirts, many without chest pockets, now make up as much as 15% of the menswear market. Such styles have won over men in their 30s who work out and want to show off their buff bodies.



Dow Chemical Co. recently developed an improvement on spandex fiber called XLA, which doesn't lose its resilience after washing and dry cleaning. Perry Ellis International Inc. and Phillips Van Heusen are among the first to introduce cotton shirts blended with about 2% Dow XLA. Spandex brands include Lycra, Elastene and Radici.

Theory LLC, an upscale sportswear maker, uses different spandex fibers in about 90% of its men's shirts, suits, pants and jeans. Unlike the stretch fibers in use in the 1990s, the fibers used today have improved as have the blending techniques, says founder Andrew Rosen. But Theory refrains from putting the word stretch on its hangtags, he adds.

Indeed, this time around menswear makers are being more clever about marketing stretch to skittish guys. They are positioning the clothes as comfortable rather than fashionable. "We used to call out the stretch on hangtags, but now we don't mention it anymore," says Karen Murray, group president at Liz Claiborne Inc., which puts stretch in its Claiborne, DKNY and Enyce men's lines. A hangtag for a Perry Ellis International stretch shirt features a male model suspended in outstretched mo-

tion. Specialty retailer Men's Warehouse Inc., which has been putting stretch in suits, dress pants and dress shirts for about four years, uses the words "flex-fit" or "comfort stretch" on packaging to get the idea across to customers and the sales force.

There are signs that mainstream men are embracing the products' practical attributes. "When brands like Tommy Bahama came out with stretch, that helped us talk some more traditional guys into trying them on," says Murray Frederickson, owner of The Hitchin' Post, an Omaha, Neb., retailer of men's clothes.

"I have to climb on scaffolds to inspect buildings," says John Campagna, the 61-year-old owner of an Edison, N.J., wall-insulation business. "These clothes allow you to be flexible to do that." And the more-tapered silhouettes "make me look slimmer," he adds.

Not every men's retailer is jumping onto the stretch bandwagon. Brooks Brothers, the standard bearer of the boxy dress shirt, has introduced cotton stretch shirts with the new Dow fiber, but only for women. But it has recently gotten some male customers to try new slim-fit dress shirts and polo shirts: The new styles now contribute 10% to

15% of its sales in those two shirt categories.

Mindful that Brooks Brothers' traditional male customers are slow to accept change, "the only place we could see stretch might be a bit in the waistband of casual pants for an added comfort factor," says Joe Dixon, vice president, production and technical services, at the retailer. If stretch were ever to be added to the waistband, "it would be in a low-key way," Mr. Dixon says. "We would sneak it in. We would just want him to wonder why he still feels good in his pants after having a big meal."