
The Wall Street Journal

Fashion, APRIL 14, 2011

A Hard-Working Suit: The New Sweet Spot Is \$500 to \$700; They Don't Look Cheap, or Like Dad's

By SARAH NASSAUER

It can cost a man a lot less to feel like a million bucks in his suit these days. There are more suits priced between \$500 and \$700 that include features once found typically on more expensive suits: fine Italian fabrics, modern cuts and narrow lapels. The goal is to attract younger men who increasingly want the current fitted, formal styles as opposed to the boxy suits and more casual officewear of their dads.

Big suit makers like Brooks Brothers and HMX, which sell suits between about \$600 and \$3,000, say their lowest-priced suits are experiencing the fastest sales growth. And next month Amsterdam-based Suitsupply, with 35 stores in Europe, plans to open its first U.S. store in New York with suits starting at \$385. Suitsupply will offer its sometimes flashy suits with details like Italian wool fabric, brightly colored lining and working button holes, features that usually carry a higher price tag.

Other efforts to keep up quality at lower prices include J. Crew Group Inc.'s expanded men's suit selection. Sales of its men's suit have more than doubled since 2008, when the clothing company introduced a slimmer style, made with Italian wool and superior interior construction, a spokeswoman says. The style, called Ludlow, starts at about \$600.

At HMX, which owns American suit brands like Hickey Freeman and Hart Schaffner Marx, the fastest growth is in its lower priced suits, around \$795, says Joseph Abboud, president and chief creative officer for HMX. Sales of Hart Schaffner Marx suits, the company's brand in that price range, are up 27% year to date compared to last year, says Mr. Abboud.

The briskest sales growth at Brooks Brothers is happening in its recently expanded Suiting Essentials line, priced starting at \$598, says Guy Voglino, divisional merchandise manager for men's clothing at the company. Sales of the line are up 28% in 2011 to date, compared to the same period last year, Mr. Voglino says.

Introduced in 2007 offering one fit, the line has expanded to four different fits, most recently the brand's narrowest cuts, the Fitzgerald and the Milano. Brooks Brothers offers some made-to-measure options including about 20 fabrics. The ability to individualize appeals to younger men who want to stand out even in a room of suits, says Mr. Voglino. Because each suit is specially ordered, the company saves money by producing only what it actually sells and doesn't risk bloated inventory.

The interest in suits at this price range comes amid an overall pick up in suit sales at some manufacturers. Brooks Brothers says sales of its 1818 Collection, priced about \$1,000, are up 26% year-over-year. HMX is seeing double digit growth in volume and dollar sales across brands and price points, says Mr. Abboud.

"We are seeing the suit business really come back in the last six months very very strongly," says Robert Burke, a luxury-goods consultant and founder of Robert Burke Associates in New York.

Many men wait for seasonal sales in order to find a good price on a suit, but suit makers hope the new \$500 to \$700 range will encourage men to buy retail instead of waiting for price cuts.

Suitsupply is able to keep down prices, in part, by picking store locations slightly off main shopping streets with lower rents, says Fokke de Jong, chief executive and founder of the company. The company's new Soho New York location will be on a second floor with no street level window display. About 15% of Suitsupply suits are sold through the website.

J. Crew, like Suitsupply, controls more aspects of production from design to distribution, cutting out payments to third-party companies that typically move suits into department stores.

Men's Wearhouse which sells suits from about \$199 to \$700, keeps prices low by offering two-for-the-price-of-one deals, increasing sales volume and therefore buying power with its suppliers, says Doug Ewert, president and chief operating officer of the Fremont, Calif.-based company.

Maintaining the current price-to-quality relationship in men's suits is likely to become increasingly difficult. Raw material prices for desirable natural fabrics like wool and cotton are rising sharply. "If I have to guess, price is going to go up 10% to 15% on the wholesale side" heading into spring 2012, says Ronny Wurtzburger, president of Peerless Clothing which manufactures men's suits for brands like DKNY, Calvin Klein and IZOD.

We enlisted two experts for an unscientific, blind review of six suits: Salvatore Giardina, a men's suit designer and professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and Salvatore Cesarani, a designer and professor at Parsons The New School for Design.

The testers found striking differences in quality, sometimes out of line with the suit's price. Both testers said the \$614 Suitsupply suit matched the \$3,625 Armani in quality. Both saw little difference in quality between the two, or at least not enough to justify a \$3,000 difference in price. Each is made with soft Italian fabric and showed the maker cared about details like pockets with extra stitching at their edges.

"It's a work of art," said Mr. Giardina when examining the sewing job in the waist band of the Armani suit pant. But after learning of the large price difference, "that means that won," Mr. Giardina said, pointing to the Suitsupply suit.

The J. Crew suit fared well with the testers noting its neat construction and that it is made of high-end Italian fabric and Bemberg lining (a type of rayon favored for its breathability and moisture absorption).

The testers said the Hart Schaffner Marx suit didn't live up to its \$895 price. Mr. Giardina noted some fraying strings on button holes and said its "AMF stitching" didn't achieve a handmade look. (AMF stitching is a wider stitch that's an aesthetic touch.) Mr. Cesarani said the jacket didn't move freely in the chest.

The test method "is an imperfect science and it's an opinion," says Mr. Abboud, noting that the suit tested is made from "super 110s wool made in Italy. "We take great pains," he adds, to make sure fabric and construction is high quality.

Mr. Giardina said the H&M suit used a lower thread count wool fabric and basic construction, but still pulled off a nice overall look. Mr. Cesarani dismissed it as "cheap looking." He docked points for the lack of extra fabric for future tailoring where the lining inside the cuff of the jacket meets the exterior fabric.

"We know that our suits are appreciated by many of our customers," said an H&M spokeswoman.

The Target suit isn't worth more than \$89, both testers agreed, calling the polyester fabric a major negative.

"Target is committed to offering quality merchandise at a great value," says a Target spokeswoman. "For our business-focused guests, this means finding suits for less than \$100."

Suitsupply's Superior Suit

Testers said a \$614 suit from Suitsupply, an Amsterdam-based company that will open its first U.S. store in New York next month, matched a \$3,600 Armani in quality and outperformed designs from J. Crew, Hart Schaffner Marx, Target and H&M. Take a look at some of the Suitsupply suit's features.

That Price Tag Suits You, Sir - What to look for when you shop, regardless of budget

- * Go for a quality natural fabric like Italian wool with a high thread count. Avoid polyester. Choose a color you will like for several years.
- * Make sure the suit fits at the shoulders. A good tailor can alter most everything else.
- * Lift jacket at the chest and make sure chest pieces feel light and flexible. This adds to the jacket's comfort.
- * Look for lining that is breathable, will absorb moisture and doesn't cause a 'swishing' sound when you move. Lining fabrics ranked from best to worst: Bemberg (a type of rayon), rayon, viscose, rayon blend, polyester.
- * Check that the collar rests flush with the nape of your neck without gaping.
- * Feel for extra fabric for future tailoring at cuffs and inside the seat of the pants near waist.

Rank and Style

We asked experts Salvatore Giardina, a men's suit designer and professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and Salvatore Cesarani, a designer and professor at Parsons The New School for Design to rank the quality of six men's suits in an unscientific blind test.

RANKINGS

Salvatore Giardina	Salvatore Cesarani
1st place: Armani, Suitsupply (tied)	1st place: Armani, Suitsupply (tied)
3rd: J. Crew	3rd: J. Crew
4th: H&M	4th: Hart Schaffner Marx
5th: Hart Schaffner Marx	5th: Target, H&M (tied)
6th: Target	

GIORGIO ARMANI | Trader Model

Very high quality fabric—Italian wool. Flawless, clean construction. Lots of attention to detail like bartack pockets.

HART SCHAFFNER MARX | American Modern

Stiff construction. AMF stitching is too obvious and rigid, says Mr. Giardina. Sloppy sewing: missed stitch on waistband and fraying at buttonholes. Quality cotton fabric used for pant pockets.

SUITSUPPLY | Sienna suit

High quality fabric. Clean, soft construction for comfort. "Lots of attention to detail," says Mr. Giardina. Pant lining matches sleeve lining. Mr. Cesarani noted some puckering at the chest piece.

J. CREW | Ludlow jacket and pant

High quality fabrics, Italian wool outer with Bemberg lining. Nice details like tie fabric as lining of interior pockets. Overall it "looks very nice," says Mr. Giardina. Chest piece is a little too stiff, says Mr. Cesarani.

H&M | Slim fit suit

The suit looks "cheap," says Mr. Cesarani. Nice, but basic, says Mr. Giardina. No AMF stitching. No reinforced stitching on collar. Buttonhole fraying on pants, but nice piping details on lining, says Mr. Giardina.

TARGET | Merona jacket and pant

"It is, what it is," says Mr. Giardina. Low quality fabric, polyester all around. No AMF stitching. No reinforced stitching on collar. No extra fabric on pants for tailoring.