

THE SKINNY ON SKIVVIES: Color & Prints Draw Men To Core Product

Remember when the Times Square billboard of Marky Mark wearing Calvin Klein boxer briefs caused a national stir?

Well, these days the white boxer brief is practically traditional in a field that's being laced with fashionable fun, color and excitement. "Fashion is such a small percent of total business, but it does add pop to the floor and draw people in," says Allison Levy, market analyst for the Doneger Group. "Comfort, stretch and a soft touch still drive what will happen."

Most men (59%) shop for underwear at least twice a year, according to Cotton Incorporated's Lifestyle Monitor™.

"I'm always looking for ways for department stores to recapture business, and right now they're coming off of mid-single-digit increases in volume in men's underwear," Levy says. "We want to increase the average unit retailing out the door, and increase the multiple sale. The fashion helps in that, if a customer comes in to buy his core, maybe he'll buy a fashion piece, too."

From 2005 to 2006, unit sales of men's underwear increased 4.8%, according to NPD Fashionworld's AccuPanel for the 10-month period January to October 2006. In 2006, the majority of men's underwear was purchased through the mass (35.6%) and off-price (38.8%) retail channels.

Levy has suggestions for retailers looking to offset gains made by value-price stores. "We need to add color back into the cycle," she says. "Colorful tech products were driving things. But now it's back to cotton, so color has to be added. The younger customer is looking for color now. And a lot of growth will come from the younger man – or the young-minded customer."

2(x)ist believes age doesn't matter. "I have men in their forties loving our low-rise briefs, and guys in their twenties loving our woven boxer shorts," says Jason Scarlatti, creative director. "If someone's accustomed to wearing one style, 2(x)ist offers it in a new, fashionable way that will give reason to branch out and try something different. It's a domino effect."

When PL>y Apparel was first introduced, retailers thought the core customer would be in his low- to mid-twenties, relates Nathan Nathan, president of Intimo Apparel, PL>y's manufacturer. "But," Nathan says, "PL>Y has appealed to a broader segment, and a high percentage of the customers are in the mid 30's. PL>Y is designed with 'youthful energy,' which is not bound by age."

At the Chicago unit of Universal Gear, a four-store contemporary men's retailer that also has a web business, "We do very well with our colors and prints," says operations manager Anthony Benedict.

"We carry Ginch Gonch and they always have playful prints that remind you of children's motifs, like stars or hot dogs," he says. "And our customers love color. We had a bright fluorescent yellow pair from C-in2 and we sold out within a week and a half – in all our stores."

Benedict says his top model is the low-rise or no-show brief. "Everything is really going lowrise right now because 90% of denim is low-rise so that style works best," Benedict says, adding that his major brands are C-in2 and 2(x)ist."

At Freshpair.com, '07 will be about more color, and styles will veer toward low-rise briefs and trunks, says Michael Kleinmann, Freshpair president and co-founder of National Underwear Day. "Men are no longer



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- Michael Kleinmann, Freshpair.com

HOW OFTEN MEN SHOP FOR UNDERWEAR

At least once a month	8%
Every two months	9%
Every 3 to 5 months	21%
Twice a year	21%
Once a year	17%
Every two years or more	3%
Seldom/never	8%
When they wear out	7%

interested in just black, white or gray. They want colors, prints -- they want some excitement," he says, adding that his top players are 2(x)ist, Cin2, Calvin Klein and Hugo Boss. Freshness comes from contrasting on the bands, and all kinds of prints: striped, or different patterns. We have some western-themed prints—like a bull rider, a red bandana print – as well as stars and fire trucks. And again, these are all low-rise styles in briefs and trunks."



Internet sales of men's underwear climbed 24% from 2005 to 2006, representing 4% of unit sales, according to NPD.

Kleinmann says for his customers, "Comfort and fit are important. But it's also about how you feel in the underwear, too. Men want to feel sexy."

To that end, Sean John is introducing a new line of "Dare to be Sexy" underwear for fall '07, produced by Basic Resources, an affiliate of Americo Group Inc. The collection will include boxers, boxer briefs, trunks, briefs, tanks, crew tees and v-necks. Fabrics will be cotton, whether blended with stretch or modal, or enzymewashed. Prices will range from \$18-to-\$30.

When asked how much money they're willing to pay for a pair of underwear, the Monitor found 15% of men would pay "a lot," most (58%)

would pay a "medium amount," and 25% "very little to none." According to NPD data, the average price for men's underwear in 2006 was \$3.31.

Some underwear is more than an interesting cut or cool color. P!>y Apparel took a cotton blend boxer and created the tech savvy iBoxer.

"The iPod has created a lifestyle that many consumers identify with," Nathan says. "Some consumers use the iBoxer's iPocket to hold their player, and some don't. However, our styling is relevant to this customer, either in function or style. All in all, the iBoxer has gained momentum, and is more popular today than it was when we first introduced it a year ago."

At 2(x)ist, where basic cotton is always the forerunner, innovations in fabrics run from the sleek "Luxe" cotton/modal blend, to "Pulse," a sporty cotton stretch design.

"For 2(x)ist, underwear is not only fashionable, but also serves a purpose," explains Scarlett. "Every season we succeed in offering trendy new colors and styles, but the fabrications and cuts

This story is one in a series of articles based on findings from Cotton Incorporated's Lifestyle Monitor™ tracking research. Each story will focus on a specific topic as it relates to the American men's wear consumer and his attitudes and behavior regarding clothing, appearance, fashion, fiber selection and many other timely, relevant subjects.



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