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REDEFINING NECKWEAR

An industry grapples with how to bring back tie business.

BY KAREN ALBERG GROSSMAN



There's no question that neckwear is downtrending. Most retailers have reduced floor space by 15-20 percent and sales are down at least that much. What's more, by many industry estimates, men's ties are about a \$700 million business in the U.S., down from \$1.8 billion at its peak in the 1980s, \$1.2 billion in the 1990s. Not a pretty picture by any standards.

Still, as Randa president Heath Golden puts it, "\$700 million is a big number, plus it's all incremental business, and relatively high margin." How unfortunate, therefore, that so many retailers are still merchandising neckwear the same way they always have: spread out horizontally on tables, assorted by color or by brand, with tremendous duplication and no clear message. What's just as unfortunate: the erroneous assumption that ties are best worn only with tailored clothing. It's a new era, and to reach younger guys, step one is to create and market neckwear that works with sportswear.

Golden shares his personal take on the power of neckwear. "Before I joined Randa, I stopped wearing ties for a while. When I started wearing them again, I felt this amazing power. Wearing a tie, you get the benefit of the doubt, a bonus 50 points of IQ. It's like a superman cape, another weapon in one's arsenal. The challenge for our industry is how to get more consumers to think differently about neckwear."

So Randa commissioned a study to determine how consumers feel about ties. They focused on a cross-section of 500 consumers

(73% men and 27% women). Among the more interesting findings:

- **81** percent of the sample wear ties for occasions, 58% for work, 37% wear ties every day.
- **56** percent of men think neckwear is uncomfortable; 35% would wear ties more often if more comfortable.
- **71** percent say ties make them feel more professional, 67% think they help make an impression, 63% say ties elevate their look and 62% make them feel good about their appearance.
- **44** percent say color drives the sale, 33% say fabric, 32% say pattern and 31% say price.
- **18** percent look for sales or discounts.
- **74** percent of sample identify as casual dressers; 24% bought at least one tie within the past month.
- **48** percent are not sure what to buy, 40% don't follow trends, 47% find it hard to match ties with outfits.

Richard Carroll from Randa puts in his two cents. "The industry has tunnel vision: most still connect neckwear to suits, to shiny satiny fabrics. I believe ties for young guys need to fit the rest of their wardrobe, which is casual. Seasonal fabrics are key: wool blends, cotton blends. And soft touch fabrics are important: brushed flannel, heathered yarns, Donegal wools, knits; why not

washed chambray ties to go with denim jackets?”

A third voice from Randa, Seth Howard, points out that Gen Z is obsessed with heritage and nostalgia and that neckwear is key to creating this look. “Be it florals or deco designs, fashion is driving new purchasing from young customers. I believe the missing element is fun! Selling floors have been too safe.”

Neckwear designer Barbara Blank agrees. “Make the neckwear floor exciting! I don’t think men want to see table upon table of ties: I think retailers should merchandise by concept, rather than by color. Then feature a fashion-right tie on a mannequin wearing cool casual clothes, and show similar ties on a display nearby.”

Another major tie maker acknowledges that the pie is definitely shrinking. “It’s not just in North America but everywhere. In Italy, once the capital of the neckwear business, you rarely see men wear ties these days. However, individuality and self-expression are becoming more important to consumers so the opportunity is there to create neckwear that reflects different personalities.” (Editor’s note: Different personalities might suggest different tie widths, which seem to have settled between 2 ½ and 3 ¼.)

“Neckwear is all about exuding style,” adds designer Ruth Graves. “Bringing back tie business is no easy feat, but who better than the better specialty shops to influence their audience. Men need not just a tie but a great tie! Specialty stores should showcase fabulous creations that are not mass produced. Right now it’s all about unique concepts featuring blends of the finest yarns. Not to sound self-serving but stores should show original creative ideas from small brands that are not broadly distributed. Carry limited edition collections. Carry product that’s not available online. Made in the USA is another strong selling point these days that should be marketed as such.”

Designer Luciano Moresco, who also reps Dolcepunta neckwear, notes: “There is no better accessory than a tie to send a message of authority, power, confidence, exclusivity and some formality, the degree of which is determined by the selection of the tie itself. The better the tie, the stronger the message.”

Dolcepunta’s Massimo Scapellato projects: “My prediction is that men will start to tire of the open shirt and jacket look. (Like when we now comment on fashion from past decades and wonder how people could possibly have dressed like that?) As a tie maker, I’m hoping that men will soon feel an open collar look is too minimal, too empty, at least for those men who regularly wear ties.”

“I think too many stores are preaching to the choir,” adds designer Margo Petitti. “They’re buying for older customers who wear ties but they’re not attracting the next generation. I think retailers need to bring in a younger more modern look (I make wool ties in a shape that tapers quickly to a 3 1/8 to 3 ¼ inch bottom but still ties a nice knot; I also use quality tipping). I understand retailers’ reluctance to risk something new with traffic down but they need to take some chances to introduce young guys to neckwear. They don’t want their fathers’ neckties and if we don’t give them something of their own, we lose them.”

Bloomingdales’ EVP Dan Leppo concurs: “As a lover of neckwear, I believe we have to treat ties like they matter. There comes a time in every guy’s life when he might want to be taken seriously, and a great tie can accomplish that!”

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