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and Couture:
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Keep the
Rag Trade
in Riches?

Dweebs in Tweeds

EVEN TECH'S WARDROBE-CHALLENGED ARE EMBRACING BRIONI. BY OWEN EDWARDS

SOONER OR LATER, TECHNOLOGY will change the fashion business, that much we can say for certain. It's less certain, though, whether fashion can change the technology business. Can the sudden reality of \$25 million (or more) in post-IPO equity push a young programmer from torn jeans and T-shirts toward the likes of Armani, Zegna, and Brioni?

It appears so. Though the leap from disheveled dweeb to Duke of Windsor wanna-be is huge, some members of technology's new elite are struggling to fill the industry's famous fashion void.

Ready to guide these wardrobe-challenged pioneers are a few enterprising retailers who have looked down the road ahead and seen a chance for high tech profits of their own. Having made their reputations putting clothes on the usual suspects—lawyers, doctors, stockbrokers—these priests of the sacred cloth have taken on a daunting challenge: converting men famous for sloth to the cult of style. *Forbes* ASAP has found three of the best.

Not surprisingly, two—Wilkes Bashford and Billy Bragman—are in San Francisco, and the other—Gian DeCaro—is in Seattle. In the old “location, location, location” game, this accident of geography puts them in the right place at the right time and gives them the same kind of edge Levi Strauss enjoyed when gold fever hit. Who would have thought there was a future in selling expensive clothes to men who, in the words of a recent advertisement for Netscape Netcenter, “Go from the dance floor to the trading floor in [their] pajamas”?

Sitting in his office on the seventh floor of the Wilkes Bashford store on Sutter Street, a short walk from Union Square in San Francisco, Wilkes Bashford, the man, is effortlessly impeccable in a gray double-breasted suit. He talks optimistically about how he sees fashion evolving and why.

“The approach to dressing has been changing significantly for the past five years in Silicon Valley,” he says. “For a long time, the valley was all about young people who competed to see who had the best ideas, not the best clothes. Not only did these kids not get out much, they hardly even mixed with each other.”

Then came a rash of IPOs, and young exemplars of dorm-rat chic were suddenly rich. Many started traveling to New York, Europe, and Japan to visit customers, analysts, and investors.

“When the emphasis went from technology to finance,” says Bashford, “it was clear to everybody that you can’t deal with money people in Asia wearing a T-shirt. That change has made a lot of difference to us. After all, these are clothes buyers who

aren’t just adding a few pieces to their wardrobes, like lawyers and stockbrokers—they’re starting from scratch.”

The learning curve is alpine when you don’t own a necktie and have taken your style cues from Eddie Vedder and Bruce Willis. For a clothier such as Bashford, the conversion process can be highly profitable. A single shopping trip at his lavishly appointed store can run \$30,000 or more—much more—and Bashford happily

reports that Silicon Valley customers account for about 25% of his current business, up from almost nothing just a few years ago.

Bashford’s windfall is also due to the dramatic democratization of tech wealth. “We’ve always had quite a lot of the top people as customers: Larry Ellison, Jim Clark, and other valley stars,” says Bashford, who for years has been putting Brioni suits and Kiton jackets on San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown. “Not too long ago, the top five or six people at a company made all the money. Now it’s the top 50, or more.”

It’s not all easy money: Those 50 newly rich clients are typically not as clothes conscious as their more celebrated predecessors—especially when men’s high-end fashion struggles with creeping Casual Friday-ism. For Bashford, developing a Silicon Valley following depends on two classic factors. Either someone sees a coworker dressing better and wants to know where that look came from, or a girlfriend decides she’s tired of going out with a software prince who looks like a pauper. One of the challenges for Bashford’s staff has been to understand that some very badly dressed men coming into the store may have a lot of money to spend. Bashford regularly reminds his staff of



Mirror, mirror... who makes nerds the nattiest of all? Clothing consigliere Gian DeCaro (here in his Seattle shop) is one of an elite corps devoted to dressing up the techies.

something a famous Texas retailer told his employees during the oil boom: "Wait on the ones who are barefoot and let the ones in fur coats wait a little while."

A few blocks away from Wilkes Bashford is the small but elegant shop BillyBlue, owned by Billy Bragman, an ex-New Yorker who, in a dozen years in the clothing business, has created a connoisseur's mecca for men interested in classic Italian clothes. In 1997, Bragman constructed a Web site (billyblue.com) for his store, convinced that if he was going to compete with Bashford, Saks, Neiman Marcus, and other, bigger menswear players, he had to tap into a new market.

His hunch paid off. One of the first people to come to the store because of the Web site was a young woman who wanted to bring in her fiancé to upgrade his wardrobe. She warned Bragman that her boyfriend wouldn't tolerate much shopping or shoptalk. Nevertheless, Bragman, an irresistible evangelist passionate about the gospel of style, went right ahead and preached. Three hours later, a happy convert left the store with the first pieces of what would become an impressively grown-up wardrobe, from Vestimenta wool crepe suits and soft woven jackets to cashmere sweaters. The next day, Bragman asked one of his regular customers, "Is Marc Andreessen somebody important?"

Netscape cofounder Andreessen has become very important to BillyBlue's bottom line, and in several ways he is a typical Silicon Valley clothes buyer: an imaginative programmer turned innovative business leader, with plenty of cash and the need to adopt a style that jibes with his rise to prominence.

Though they may have to be dragged into men's stores, high tech shoppers often turn out to be the best kind of customers, according to Bashford. "These are people who are engineers and scientists—they want to know how things work, what a product does, how it should be worn," he says. "They're hungry for information. Their interest in clothes isn't based on snobbism as much as a desire for quality, and they take an intellectual approach. They'll spend \$3,500 for a suit, but you have to be able to tell them why it's worth that much."

If Bashford and Bragman face an educational challenge, Seattle's Gian DeCaro is more of a therapist. His store, Gian DeCaro Sartoria, at the corner of First Avenue and Lenora Street, just uphill from the Pike Street Market, is impressive without being intimidating. Though lined with bolts of expensive cloth from Loro Piana and Carlo Barbera and dark wood cases filled with baby alpaca sweaters, cashmere fabric, silk polos, and \$145 limited-edition Italian silk ties, the place has the feel of a hangout. An antique mahogany rolltop desk, once the property of the vice chairman of Lloyds of London, lends the store an air of benevolent authority.

DeCaro, the son of a master tailor from Calabria, Italy, is to Seattle's technology community what Savile Row is to

London's barristers. Suitless in Seattle? Not anymore. On any given day, you will find a Microsoft millionaire or two being fitted for a new suit (or several). In many cases, DeCaro has served not just as a tailor for young men who have moved up the ladder in Redmond but as a consigliere. Microsoft stock has made them millionaires, and DeCaro has taught them how to look like a million. In return, word of mouth at the company has shifted the balance of his business from traditionally well-dressed trades to traditionally slovenly ones.

"If it wasn't for Microsoft," DeCaro says, "I wouldn't be doing nearly as much business as I am today. The conventional wisdom—that executives at old-line companies

worry about their images and tech company people don't—no longer applies. It's the lawyers and brokers who are down-dressing now, trying to emulate the software guys. And ironically, it's those software guys who are going the other way."

DeCaro began courting Microsoft big shots 10 years ago, and he has bagged the biggest shot of all, Bill Gates. In the early '90s, DeCaro wrote personal letters to Gates and to Seattle's other top executives telling them about his business. In his letter to Gates, DeCaro asked if he could make him a suit. Months later DeCaro got his answer, and Gates got his fitting. It produced the first of many

suits. The slow but steady "denerdification" of Chairman Bill's public image is due, in no small part, to DeCaro's skill. "Gates has an elegant wardrobe of clothes, and he does dress well when he has to," DeCaro says with an author's pride.

With the top man as an example, Microsoft's tech trolls began to emerge into the bright sunlight of success and discover there was more to life than sweatshirts. "These are some of my favorite customers," DeCaro says. "They admit right away they don't know anything about clothes, but before long they learn all about fabrics the way they learn about wines. My little crusade has been to take guys who are brilliant and turn them into gentlemen. Once you get them interested, they buy a lot. I have at least 15 customers who have several hundred custom shirts, 75 pairs of made-to-order cotton trousers—rich-guy Dockers—and a closet full of suits. Thanks to the tech guys, we probably sell more custom-made cotton slacks than any tailor in the United States. When great new fabrics come in, they order two in each color."

Lately, DeCaro has expanded his hunt for fashion-hungry technology aristos, opening a Web site (giandecaro.com) and making periodic trips to San Francisco for Silicon Valley business. Andreessen, now the chief technology officer of America Online (thanks to its merger with Netscape), owns nearly 100 DeCaro suits.

The Seattle maestro smiles a soulful, Marcello Mastroianni smile: "These guys have figured out, bless 'em, that women would much rather go to bed with George Clooney than George Costanza."

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