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BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY FOR NEXT-GENERATION SERVICE PROVIDERS

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# Fashion senseless

by  
**Kate Gerwig**

**Service providers, vendors and tailors are pressing home the fundamental question: Is that a PDA in your pocket, or are you just enjoying SuperComm?**

Can we talk? Everyone knows that unsightly bulges used to refer to the dreaded “panty line”—a women’s issue that clearly wasn’t raised in polite circles. Well, we’ve come a long way, baby—so long that unsightly bulges today have more to do with hardware than underwear.

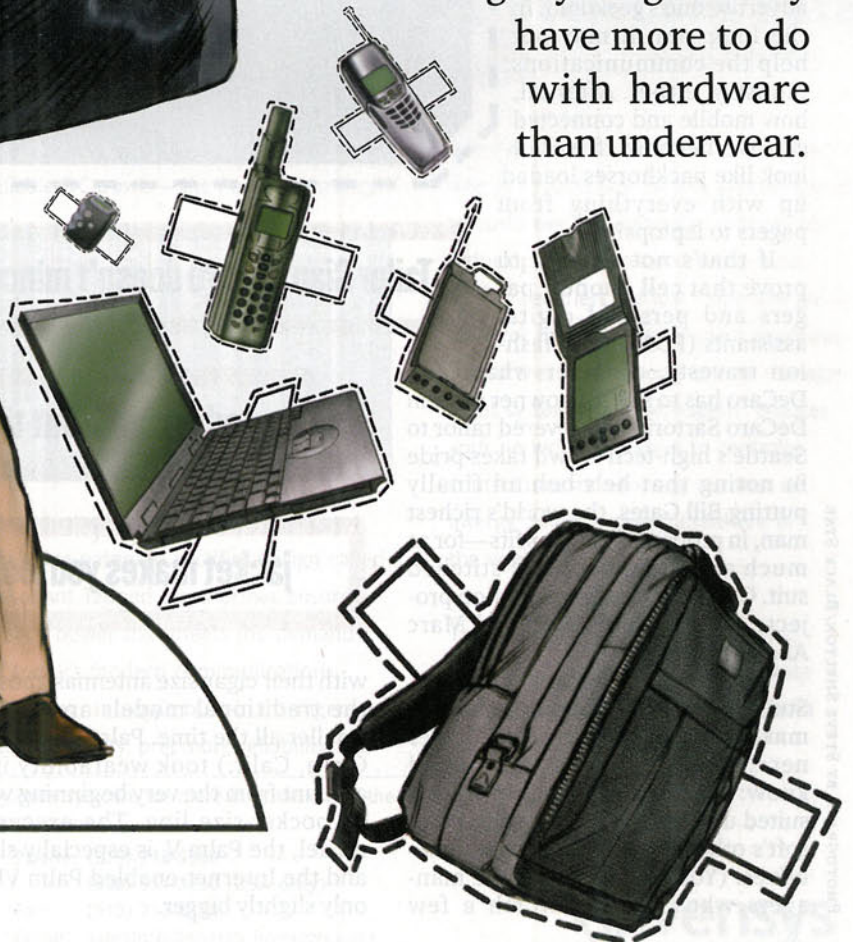


ILLUSTRATION BY MATT COLLINS



The bulges also have more to do with men than women. Even stranger, the wearers actually seem eager to show them off.

We're talking, of course, about the increasing number of devices hanging on people's belts, sticking out of their pockets and effectively tap-dancing on the head of American fashion. And let's be honest: Not only are they unsightly, they add inches to areas that don't necessarily need to be padded out. Worse still, they're starting to undermine the wearer's credibility.

**W**ant proof that fashion don'ts are running amok? Just wander the floor of a communications trade show for half an hour—SuperComm in Atlanta this week will do—and you'll see all the evidence you'll ever need. The increasing number of interactive and Internet-ready devices that people can hang on themselves has the unfortunate side effect of increasing the potential to advertise one's geekdom. In the long run, it may not help the communications industry, either. After all, how mobile and connected can we become if we all look like packhorses loaded up with everything from pagers to laptops?

If that's not enough to prove that cell phones, pagers and personal digital assistants (PDAs) are a fashion travesty, consider what Gian DeCaro has to say. The owner of Gian DeCaro Sartoria and revered tailor to Seattle's high-tech crowd takes pride in noting that he's behind finally putting Bill Gates, the world's richest man, in properly fitting outfits—for as much as \$6,000 per hand-stitched suit. Other rumored reclamation projects include Paul Allen and Marc Andreessen.

"I want to be adamant about this. Stuffing the pockets of your jacket just makes you look like an even bigger nerd," DeCaro insists. He should know: After getting Gates properly suited up, he took on many of Microsoft's other fashion-challenged executives. (You know, the middle managers who are only worth a few

million dollars.) "Some of these people have never even been taught how to tie a tie," he says. "No one ever earns the right to dress improperly for business."

Hardware vendors, service providers and top-shelf tailors like DeCaro are all taking initiatives to bring some sense to this fashionless world before everyone pops their buttons. Vendors are pushing to make their products smaller and lighter. If you don't consider satellite-enabled cell phones

Providers are helping by converging services—and theoretically eliminating the need for some devices. Vendors are looking at combining devices to cut down on the load. Tailors aren't worried about making pants too long, but they are concerned with recutting suits and jacket pockets to better accommodate hardware. Some trendy clothing manufacturers, like Brooks Brothers (New York), are even unveiling whole new lines just to handle the pressure.



**Tailor Gian DeCaro doesn't mince words: "I want to be**

**adamant about this. Stuffing the pockets of your**

**jacket makes you look like an even bigger nerd."**

with their cigar-size antennas, most of the traditional models are getting smaller all the time. Palm Inc. (Santa Clara, Calif.) took wearability into account from the very beginning with its pocket-size line. The executive model, the Palm V, is especially slim, and the Internet-enabled Palm VII is only slightly bigger.

Yet regaining fashion sense won't be easy, and it may get a lot worse before it gets better. John Sidgmore, vice chairman of MCI WorldCom Inc. and chairman of UUNet Technologies Inc. (Ashburn, Va.), predicts we may be carrying up to five Internet-enabled devices in the near future, although he wouldn't speculate on



exactly where we'll carry them. To be fair, he points out that two of them could be Internet watches and glasses that companies like Motorola Inc. are working on right now. At least we have a good idea where those would go. Placing the rest, however, is anyone's guess.

**T**echnology and tailoring challenges aside, the trend toward carrying buckets of hardware won't be easily overcome. It has now become geek chic. How would someone in a bar know they could beam you their phone number if your PalmPilot wasn't showing? And if you didn't hang your tiny Web-enabled cell phone on your belt, would someone assume you're analog and ashamed? Then there's the whole color issue to deal with. Last year's gray could be this year's aubergine. The health-conscious have also chimed in by sporting earphones for their cell phones in an attempt to prevent brain tumors. Nice idea, even if they often look like they're talking to themselves.

It's all enough to make one call the fashion police. And no industry may be in more dire need of saving than the device-obsessed communications industry. This shouldn't be surprising, given that these devices are the heart and soul of the industry's business. But that doesn't mean they should be given free rein over the corporate body. News flash: Extreme business casual is soooo 1990s. Right along with revisiting the definition of "business casual" (and no, that does not include shorts, ripped T-shirts, Birkenstocks or Tevas) comes the move to cover up those devices. That "casual geek" look may

still cut it in Seattle—barely—but it doesn't translate well in a global economy.

The industry might want to take a lesson from James Crowe, president and CEO of Level 3 Communications

notion of having his suits specially cut to accommodate the three cell phones, pager and PalmPilot that he carries every day. But even he has his limits. The small Motorola StarTak cell phone goes in his upper jacket pocket, the PalmPilot in his shirt pocket and the pager on his belt—yes, clipped to his belt. His other two cell phones, thank goodness, are stashed in his briefcase and retrieved only when needed. And he wears a suit or sports jacket at least four days a week, which makes carrying his gadgets easier.

For Leo Spiegel, president of Digital Island Inc. (San Francisco), the increasing number of interactive devices led him straight back to wearing sports jackets on the days he doesn't wear suits. "Where else can I carry all these things? I need the pockets," says Spiegel, who routinely carries a cell phone (two when in Europe), a Palm V in his upper jacket pocket and a pager in a lower jacket pocket. He draws the line at hanging things from his belt. The man may be a geek—he offers that tidbit unprompted—

but he believes the key to smart use of electronic devices is that they be hidden and used only when needed.

Many well-tailored top execs from more traditional communications companies never left the suit behind. Good for them. But that doesn't mean they have forsaken gadgets. Instead, they've adapted. Paul Gudonis, CEO of e-business service provider Genuity Inc. (formerly GTE Internetworking, Burlington, Mass.), is a classic example. He has had the the upper inside pockets of all his jackets lengthened by an inch



**When not in suits tailored to hold a cell phone, Genuity**

**CEO Paul Gudonis opts for his company's fishing**

**vest, due to its array of device-holding pockets.**

Inc. (Broomfield, Colo.). He carries three devices—PDA, cell phone and pager—but courageously stashes them in his briefcase.

Not all of the industry's leading lights are this enlightened. Sidgmore is no slave to fashion and balks at the



# Fashion statements

## COVER ALLS

Decorum and devices have convinced Digital Island president Leo Spiegel to return to the days of sports coats and suits. "Where else can I carry all these things?" he asks. "I need the pockets."

## CELLULAR DESIGNS

Old-line designer Brooks Brothers has entered the fray by making the cell phone pocket a permanent addition to the lower inside pocket of its "SB3" business casual suit line. The special pocket was also designed into its outerwear line, which was released this spring to rave reviews.

## EVERY INCH COUNTS

Genuity CEO Paul Gudonis has taken matters into his own hands in the battle to keep communications devices under control. He's had the top inside pocket of all his jackets lengthened by an inch to ensure complete cell phone coverage.

## FIVE BUSY PIECES

MCI WorldCom vice chairman John Sidgmore says more devices will be rushing into the hands and pockets of consumers in the next few years. In fact, he predicts consumers could be carrying five Internet-enabled devices soon, although they might include wristwatches and glasses.



to ensure complete cell phone coverage.

Even Brooks Brothers, the 182-year-old bastion of traditional men's (and women's) attire, is bending to the times and selling specific "business casual" clothing to accommodate cells and PDAs. This fall, in fact, Brooks will make the "cell phone pocket" a permanent addition

#### BAG IT

Seattle's revered tailor to the geeks, Gian DeCaro, offers a simple solution to the device-obsessed: Bag them. He suggests men start carrying handbags as they do in Europe to hold their PDAs, cell phones and pagers. Fat chance, counters San Francisco clothier Billy Bragman. "Bags just don't fit the American machismo thing."

to the lower inside pocket of its "SB3" business casual suit line (the ones where the jacket and pants can be bought and worn separately, as corporate casualness dictates). The cell pocket has been designed into outerwear, too. Brooks Brothers tried out the new pocket in its spring line and sales were off the charts, says Geri Corrigan, Brooks Brothers' director of public relations.

**D**eCaro says the whole issue of recutting suits to accommodate these devices could become moot if men would just take up carrying a small bag, which is common in Europe.

But Billy Bragman, owner of Billy Blue's, a men's private label clothing store in San Francisco that also caters to a high-tech clientele, says it will never happen. The plain truth, says Bragman, is that corporate America just isn't ready for men's handbags. "Bags just don't fit the American machismo thing. So we need special pockets," he adds.

Not to worry, however. Bragman says this won't require major surgery. In many cases, all it takes is a nip and a tuck to what used to be called the cigarette pocket, which is located on the lower inside of a jacket. These pockets of yore can be altered just slightly to handle a cell phone. At least that way it pulls the line of the jacket down for a proper fit rather than bulging out of a breast pocket, Bragman explains.

We may have come a long way, but every misplaced bulge remaining still registers a visual "Yow!" and reminds us that we've still got a long way to go. ●

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