



Bonobos photos

EPICENTER

MENSWEAR ON THE MOVE

*Ecommerce startups advance the omnichannel concept
by seamlessly blending online and offline shopping*

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

Apple revolutionized consumer electronics shopping with its beautifully designed, well-staffed meccas. Sephora forever changed the way women shop for beauty with its open-sell playground of high-end cosmetics.

Now Bonobos, the e-commerce menswear company best known for its well-fitting chinos, is breaking ground in the realm of fashion retail with its “guideshops,” an unusual hybrid of online and personalized offline shopping.

“We are the pioneer in reinventing retail for this day and age,” says Stanford alum and Bonobos co-founder Andy Dunn, whose plan for launching a Web-only company in 2009 has since evolved into an aggressive brick-and-mortar expansion that includes its second Bay Area location in San Jose’s Santana Row. “We realized, of course people love to touch and feel clothes, but we can also provide a real retail experience without customers walking out with their order.”

While mass retailers from Gap and Macy’s to Kohl’s and J.C. Penney are closing stores and seeking ways to stay current in the fast-changing, omnichannel arena, a new breed of specialty e-commerce startups is popping up in the Bay Area with physical storefronts that are redefining offline shopping.

Instead of the traditional store model of tracking backroom inventory and tying up staff with the tedious task of constantly folding clothes, says Dunn, Bonobos’ guideshops offer an edited, relaxed space where guys can enjoy a beer during their 45-minute appointments. There, they receive one-on-one sample fittings from knowledgeable “guides,” before placing an online order that is delivered to their doorstep within one to five business days.

“The online is incredibly important, but so is the offline,” says Dunn, who is planning to add at least 19 domestic showrooms to its current 13 by the end of 2016. “Software enables a lot of things in the physical world to be automated and go away. But in clothing, people still want a tactile experience. They want to see the color. They want to try it on. We take all the beauty from the experi-



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Andy Dunn, Bonobos founder/CEO

ence of buying clothes, but subtract a lot of the complexity of the fulfillment.”

commercial real estate services firm headquartered in Chicago, says startups like Bonobos illustrate a maturation of the omnichannel concept.

“It’s counterintuitive,” says Brown. “It’s not driving the convenience of shopping at home online, but more and more stores are putting in direct access to online ordering in bricks and mortar because it turns out people who are already out and about shopping like to order things that way. Whether consumers are shopping online or offline, it’s about making it all seamless.”

Bespoke suit makers Alton Lane, headquartered on the same block in New York as Bonobos, launched both its e-commerce site and New York showroom in 2009, hypothesizing that the future of retail would indeed be omnichannel.

Its eighth location bowed in San Francisco’s Jackson Square in November and offers customers a tech-savvy, destination shopping experience.

“We’re changing the stale retail feel into something that feels more residential, more private and a little cooler,” says Colin Hunter, Alton Lane’s CEO and co-founder, who has plans for an aggressive expansion of 30 to 40 additional showrooms in the next five years. “It’s an environment that puts the customer first instead of the product first.”

Clients go online to book a one-hour appointment for fabric selection and a fitting that in-

cludes a 3-D computerized body scan followed by measurements double-checked by hand by a tailor, which are then uploaded via an iPad to the client’s digital account. A custom suit lands at your doorstep within four to six weeks.

Showrooms are appointed with masculine touches such as custom leather furniture, flat-screen TVs for game-watching, a menu of whiskeys, bourbons and beers, and charming architectural features such as bookshelves that open up to reveal a hidden mahogany poker table, as in the Dallas store, or a hidden wine room built into the 800-square-foot San Francisco space.

“You can watch the Super Bowl in our showrooms while having beer and prosciutto,” says Hunter. “That’s not something that happens in the large department store or that happens even in traditional retail.”

Hunter says they’ve also spent the last seven months building out a custom 31-foot Airstream equipped with the same 3-D body scanner, flat screens and full bar found in their showrooms.

The high-tech pop-up shop will hit the road this spring making stops at boutique hotels, business schools, athletic training camps, Silicon Valley tech companies and other potential client hubs in key cities. The goal is to have a fleet of Alton Lane Airstreams traveling the country, Hunter says.

Menswear isn’t the only sector of fashion experimenting with the delayed gratification model of “buy in store now, receive your order later.”

Prescription eyeglass purveyor Warby Parker, launched as a New York e-commerce site four years ago, has since opened up showrooms and toured a school bus pop-up shop cross country. The brand’s ninth brick-and-mortar opened in Hayes Valley in November.

“The physical store will never go away,” says Helen Bulwik, partner at Bay Area CEO advisory firm Newport Board Group. “Warby Parker launched online as a great concept. But ultimately the customer wants to fit a pair of glasses on their face without having to buy five and return four of them later. In today’s world, you have to be everywhere the customer is. If you aren’t across all channels, you will ultimately not make it.”

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From top: Bonobos’ new San Jose guideshop is the second in the Bay Area. The guideshops offer a nontraditional retail space where men can relax during 45-minute appointments that include a custom fitting. Co-founder Andy Dunn plans to expand from 13 to 32 domestic showrooms over the next two years.