



Ideas & People

**I**T WASN'T SO LONG AGO THAT MORE MEN'S CLOTHES WERE bought by women for men than by the guys who actually wore them. Even in the 1990s, just 52 percent of American men bought most of their own clothes, according to market researcher NPD Group. Some men felt taking such an obvious interest in their appearance was a sign of vanity; others didn't enjoy the time and effort involved. Several behavioral research firms have observed that men treat shopping like hunting: They go in for the kill and get out as quickly as possible. In stores, the experience left a lot of unhappy hunters.

The world of menswear changed around the turn of the century, and the major factor in the cultural shift was the Internet. Instant and private gratification, as it turns out, is a boon for menswear as well as pornography. In 2010, online spending on men's apparel rose 7 percent over the year before to \$4.5 billion, and menswear is now considered the prime untapped opportunity in the \$237 billion luxury-goods industry.

Yoox Group SpA, launched by Italian entrepreneur Federico Marchetti in 2000, was one of the first companies on the scene. Yoox, which in addition to running its own luxury online boutique also provides the back-end technology for the sites of more than 25 fashion brands, has become a powerhouse in Europe and Asia. To exploit the growing men's market online, Yoox launched thecorner.com in 2008, a much more edited, or in the overused parlance of this burgeoning business, "curated," site featuring such brands as Etro, Marc Jacobs and Viktor &

Rolf. Thecorner.com takes for granted that its customer doesn't need hand-holding. He knows what he wants and he is in and out with a quick click, as he tends to be in his nonvirtual life.

In the past several months, three new sites selling designer menswear have muscled into the arena. The biggest player so far is Mr Porter, a spin-off of the highly successful women's site Net-a-Porter, which is well-known and loved for its "editorial" advice and ideas. It is like a shoppable magazine. The premise is that perhaps in private a man does want that extra bit of help and advice he would never want to be seen asking for in an actual store. Also getting in on the full-price action are discount flash-sale sites, such as Gilt Groupe, which recently launched Park & Bond (in partnership with GQ magazine). And retail behemoth J.C. Penney has teamed up with Esquire magazine on an e-commerce partnership: Clad.

The million-dollar question for all of them is this: How do you get men to click the Buy button? Women's online shopping has been around much longer and the art of sales seduction is now a science, but for men's sites it's still a thrilling game of exploration. Do men want the straight-up, no-garnish, see-shirt, buy-shirt approach? Or do they want a little foreplay, some editorial lovemaking about fabrics and cuts?

The heads of the top two sites, thecorner.com's fashion director, Leonardo Girombelli, and mrporter.com's editor in chief, Jeremy Langmead, offer competing points of view. Let the best-dressed man win.

**GUY TALK**  
The Corner fashion director Leonardo Girombelli (left) and Mr Porter editor in chief Jeremy Langmead.

BATTLE LINES

**WHO KNOWS WHAT MEN WANT?**

The directors of two very different online men's fashion sites think they have what you're looking for

BY RAY A. SMITH



38 October 2011

Photographs by Danilo Scarpati



**Ideas & People**

BATTLE LINES

## THE CORNER VS. MR PORTER



IN ONE CORNER WE HAVE THE CHAMPION, Leonardo Girombelli, fashion director of thecorner.com, who argues that men want their fashion straight up, no chaser. In the other corner is the challenger, Jeremy Langmead, editor in chief of mrporter.com, who argues that men like a little cajoling and stylish backstory before entering their credit-card numbers.



THE CORNER		MR PORTER
<p>Men are getting more confident and a bit more experimental about fashion. In the past, men were a bit more stiff. They're more free now. The Corner's customers are fashion-forward and don't need to be driven that carefully, which is why we're not so editorial and more of a retailer.</p>	<p><b>Do men care about fashion or simply not looking like a fool?</b></p>	<p>Men aren't willing to rush out and buy the next big thing. At Mr Porter, we have a style-over-fashion point of view. It's about what's going to make you feel good. That's why we have content to read and give advice rather than try to push men to the virtual cash till straight away. A lot of men don't have confidence and want to ask questions before buying.</p>
<p>Men don't want to spend too much time shopping so they like to do it online. They know precisely what they want, and they want to get straight to the point more than women. Men buy, they don't shop.</p>	<p><b>Why shop online?</b></p>	<p>Online is a faster, more lifestyle-friendly environment for men to shop in. An easier way to get as much information without any pressure before you buy anything. Men can take their time rather than traipsing to the middle of town to go shopping.</p>
<p>In my mind, our site is for people like Sean Penn or Maurizio Cattelan, people with an individual vision beyond just being a good-looking guy. They want to be the first to discover brands. Our approach feels like a department store, where customers experience the designer's vision while shopping. We're more straight to the point.</p>	<p><b>How to entice men?</b></p>	<p>You can't just talk about fashion. You need to talk about the lifestyle that it fits into. We are a magazine that you can shop, with non-fashion-related features, profiles and various sources of information—a sort of man's world. That's why we don't shoot models. We use woodworkers... real people. It's a gentle journey. There's hand-holding.</p>
<p>Our customers shop four or five times per season. They spend five to 10 minutes per visit—about 30 percent less time than women do when it comes to pulling the trigger. [In July, thecorner.com saw 110,000 unique visitors.]</p>	<p><b>Does it work?</b></p>	<p>On average, our customers buy something after the fourth visit. Sunday is an important shopping day for us. Men can take their time. Our customers spend a lot of time reading the site. [In July, mrporter.com saw 255,000 unique visitors.]</p>
<p>Dries Van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, Rick Owens. The more established customers appreciate Zegna or Jil Sander. Our English customers like to buy jackets. The French, German, Japanese and Italians like knits. Frenchmen like hats. And Americans like to buy bow ties.</p>	<p><b>What sells?</b></p>	<p>The big brands like Ralph Lauren and Gucci, as well as niche brands like Richard James. Men want the basics and essentials but also specialty items that have a history—Luis Morais bracelets are hugely popular for us. A lot of men are buying bracelets to wear with suits.</p>
<p>Well over \$500</p>	<p><b>How much is the average sale?</b></p>	<p>\$700</p>
<p>I'm a serial buyer: Neil Barrett shirts, Dries Van Noten knits, Common Projects sneakers.</p>	<p><b>What have you bought lately?</b></p>	<p>I like traditional with a twist. I've bought a velvet jacket, a tweed jacket, corduroy trousers and leather boots in the past two weeks.</p>