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Fashion Online: Retailers Tackle The Gender Gap

BY RAY A. SMITH

THIS GROUP IS a retailer's dream: When shopping online, they spend more, make snap decisions—and return less stuff.

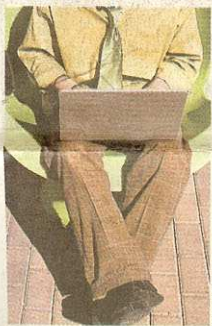
Who are these desirable shoppers? Men. While men and women shop differently in brick-and-mortar stores, the Internet has long been seen as offering similar speed and efficiency to both genders. But recent research by analysts and retailer has turned up significant gender differences where it comes to online shopping.

The most striking is men's need for speed. "Men tend to value their time more," says Suchaita Mulpuru, a Forrester Research Inc. analyst.

But men also spend more money online—and they spend big on luxury. Such findings, coupled with the relative strength of men's apparel in general—sales rose 4.4% to \$57.2 billion last year, compared with a 1.1% increase to \$103.1 billion for women's apparel, according to market researcher NPD Group—are prompting more online fashion retailers to take aim at men.

Some retailers, such as Italy's **Yoox Group SpA**, are launching shopping sites just for men, while others, including **Neiman Marcus Group Inc.** and **Saks Inc.**, are beefing up their men's sections and tweaking their sites to make it easier—and faster—for men to shop. **Brooks Brothers**, for instance, halved the time it takes for images to pop up to fractions of a second. And **neimanmarcus.com** now gives shoppers a way to view 52 ties at once in its new Tie Shop, instead of having to look at them nine at a time.

There are plenty of incentives. When researcher Unity Marketing of Stevens, Pa., surveyed 1,300 luxury shoppers last fall, it found



Men shop faster than women online and spend more.

that men reported spending an average of \$2,401 on "fashion"—including clothing and accessories—online in the previous three months, compared with \$1,527 for women. Unity noted that women may be more apt to bargain-hunt when it comes to fashion. And in a December survey by market researcher BIGresearch, nearly 90% of about 6,000 men said they "regularly" or "occasionally" make purchases online, compared with about 86% of 10,000 women surveyed.

Meanwhile, men return fewer items. Forrester's Ms. Mulpuru estimates that men send back fewer than 10% of their apparel purchases, while women return more than 20% of the apparel they purchase. "As long as the product is good enough, [men] are less likely to return it," she says. "They'd sooner put it in the back of the closet."

Reynaldo Colon Jr., a media planner in New York, recently bought a \$50 dress shirt online, only to discover that the fit was tighter than he preferred. He gave it away. "I couldn't be bothered" to

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return it, he says, adding that he would have been more inclined to do that if the shirt had cost more. Men also don't want to spend a lot of time shopping. It takes them only a third of the time it takes women to make a purchase, according to internal research conducted by Yoox, which is an operator of designer-apparel sites based in Bologna, Italy. That was just one of the findings that prompted Yoox to launch an online luxury department store just for men earlier this month. Called thecorner.com, it features shops devoted to upscale designers such as Etro, Marc Jacobs and Viktor & Rolf, along with some lesser-known names.

Yoox was encouraged by other data as well. When it reviewed shopping patterns around the world bought items that cost more than \$500 (\$777) more often than women, Mr. Marchetti says.

Women's clothes still get more attention on the home pages of most major retailers, such as Bergdorf Goodman's site. But some stores are starting to make their sites more appealing to men. With

easier-to-navigate page views at the Tie Shop, "we wanted to give men features that allow them to see a lot of product in a short amount of time and to be able to find something online quickly, not have them clicking back and forth," says Gerald Barnes, senior vice president of Neiman Marcus Direct, which includes catalog and online divisions.

This month, Neiman Marcus is mailing its first men's spring catalog, with a goal of drawing men to its Web site. Women have long received such catalogs. In the past, Neiman Marcus says, the men's merchandise on the Web site was geared to what women would buy for the men; now, it's oriented toward the increased numbers of men who are shopping for themselves.

Bergdorf, which is owned by Neiman Marcus, has added more shoes and leather goods such as briefcases to its Web site in the past year and is looking to add more suits soon.

Saks Fifth Avenue, meanwhile, added 40 men's designer brands to its saks.com site last year, along with new categories such as tailored clothing. The men's section has grown at a "significantly higher" rate than the women's, says Denise Incandela, president of Saks Direct, the online division.

In reviewing men's shopping patterns, Saks found that they "tend to be less research-focused, more in and out in terms of buying stuff," while women spend more time looking at the site, says Ms. Incandela. That's why the women's section of the Saks site currently features three-minute fashion videos and the men's section doesn't.

Brooks Brothers has tweaked its Web site to allow both men and women to view entire outfits featured in newspaper and magazine ads, instead of having to hunt for a particular blazer, shirt and pants. While the feature is available to both sexes, company officials believe men are more likely to use it. "Men are more tactical; they want to get in and out the door fast," explains Jarid Lukin, Brooks Brothers' e-commerce manager.

Explanations for the differences in shopping styles vary, but many analysts said women browse more—sometimes without ever buying anything. They may also do research online but actually buy their clothes at stores.

What's more, women tend to make "more of an effort" to seek out deals and promotions, says Patti Freeman Evans, senior analyst for retail at Jupiter Research in New York. But overall, she sees more similarities than differences. Both men and women, she says, see the Web "as a very efficient and convenient way to shop."