

Clothes Make the Outfitter

Go Beyond the Container and Start Selling the Contents



BY GARRETT LAI

There are two things every traveler brings on every journey: a bag, and the clothing in it. And if you're exclusively in the luggage business, you're only providing half of each traveler's needs. "Clothing is absolutely essential.

When someone comes in and buys a nice suitcase, they expect that bag to last 10 years? 15 years? Longer?" asks Bob Bestor of Travel Essentials, in Ashland, OR. It could be years before that customer needs to return for more luggage. "But it doesn't matter how many shirts a guy has in his closet. If he sees another

shirt he likes, he's going to buy it."

Offering a smart mix of clothing that's right for your store will give you more per-customer sales, more repeat business, and a loyal clientele. Sam Hirsh, of Tripquipment in Falmouth, ME, is absolutely convinced. "In today's

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world, if you want to be in the travel goods industry, you need to be there [in clothing sales], whether it's just with underwear and the very basics, or it's more in depth. If you want people not just coming in and buying sets of luggage, but coming back, you have to be in clothing."

The best part of the apparel business is it doesn't take a lot to ease into it. And how far you take it is entirely up to you.

The Minimalist Approach (aka No Dressing Room Required)

It doesn't require much investment, or a lot of floor space, to get into the apparel game. "We don't really give any 'floor' space to travel clothing," says Gwin Hammond, director of marketing for Mori's Luggage & Gifts. "It's mainly hung on the wall. If I had to give a percentage, it's only 1% or 2% of our floor space." Mori's 28 stores in the southeast include 22 mall stores, where space is at a premium. "We've stuck with smaller, easier things," says Hammond. Compression socks are a clothing essential, and Mori's sources theirs from Zensah and Crescent. "We carry Tilley Endurables hats, and they provide heads for display that can sit on a shelf," Hammond continues. "We carry SCOTTeVEST, a couple of the basic vests and jackets; and a very small selection of ExOfficio travel underwear. We worked with companies to pick best sellers that we can fit on the accessory wall, without having to build a dressing room."

Outerwear is a category that doesn't require a big footprint or a dressing room. Bill Lockwood, of Craghoppers, reports that the company's National Geographic™ Collection performs well with travel goods retailers. "It's lightweight, quick-dry, very packable into its pocket or stuff sack. Jackets and vests are the majority of our business because the majority of travel goods stores don't have changing rooms. We're testing the CompressLite jacket with Landmark Luggage, something you can pop on in the store." From a stocking perspective, Lockwood counsels retailers that clothing isn't as daunting as it seems. "Most people stock two colorways. The base color is black, or khaki if we're looking at shirts or trousers. Then you have a



The multi-pocketed CompressLite jacket from Craghoppers is a good winter layering piece, and is being tested with select travel goods retailers.

Zensah's compression sleeves provide an alternative to compression socks, and can provide in-flight relief from altitude-induced swelling, as well as helping ease tired dogs after a long day of sightseeing or adventuring on your feet.

The National Geographic license and smart store fixture make Craghoppers a simple way to get into clothing sales.



"A clothing rack is like a pool table," says Steve Rooten of Rooten's Luggage. "You have to leave room for people to walk around it."

secondary, pop color. In men's maybe it's blue. For women it's more feminine, a fuchsia, or peacock blue. Those are what would pass for high-visibility colors in this space, as opposed to the bright oranges and greens happening in outdoors right now, which I'd stay away from."

Tripquipment's staple apparel items are easy to size, and don't necessarily require a changing room (but Hirsh does have one, and insists that it's necessary because "a bathroom is not a dressing room"). Tripquipment carries socks from Darn Tough Vermont, Farm to Feet and Tilley Endurables, and compression socks from Sigvaris, Travelsox and Sockwell. "ExOfficio underwear

sales are phenomenal. We also carry ExOfficio and Marmot rain jackets – if you can sell umbrellas you can sell a rain jacket."

Like every retailer we interviewed for this story, Hirsh says it's important to talk up the virtues of the clothing you offer. "You cannot go wrong with underwear, unless you don't talk about it. If you put it on your wall and expect it to sell itself, it won't. It's our biggest seller in units, after adapter plugs and security pouches."

At the same time, Hirsh acknowledges that clothing is challenging. "Clothing doesn't pay for its real estate yet," he says of his store, estimating that 10-15% of his floor space is given over

“Every rack has a front display with layered clothing – hat, neck-lace, the whole bit,” says Cindy McClelland of Changes in Latitude. “You have to make a commitment to the category.”



UBU's Milan jacket is packable outerwear that defies the outdoorsy look with a fashionable silhouette and eye-catching materials.



This simple display from Tilley Endurables can go on a shelf or countertop, and helps sell by extolling the virtues of the famous Tilley hat with very little space commitment.

to apparel. “But if we want to fulfill the premise of what Tripquipment is, that we’re a travel outfitter, we’ve got to carry travel clothing.”

Easing In

It’s...In The Bag! of Palm Desert, CA, began carrying clothing eight years ago, in the form of ExOfficio’s nearly ubiquitous Give-N-Go travel underwear. “A customer told us it was the greatest thing,” recalls Matt Howe, general manager. “We wanted to try it, so we split an order with Lieber’s Luggage [in Albuquerque, NM]. And it sold like wildfire. You tell people you can take two pairs of underwear for a 2-week

trip, wash it at night and it’s dry in the morning.” It’s...In The Bag! progressed slowly into shirts and pants. “At first it was quick-dry travel shirts with venting, rollup sleeves, sun protection and flip-up collars. Then it was the same idea with pants. Our number one pant zips off to convert into shorts, for customers going to Europe. You have to wear pants in the cathedrals, but with these you can wear shorts when walking around, then put the legs on for a church tour.”

Howe says it’s important to change up the look of your displays. “As we’ve expanded with clothing, we’ve brought in new brands like Mountain Khakis. Our latest is Kühl; it’s done really well

for us. It’s something fresh in the store, and that’s important, something new so your customers don’t see the same shirt when they come in.”

Clothing gives staff the opportunities to engage customers because “we all wear the clothing,” Howe relates. “Right now I have an ExOfficio shirt on, Kühl shorts, the underwear. We have great reps who give us pieces to try out, so we can talk up how great the clothing is, first hand.”

“Nothing’s more powerful than firsthand testimonial,” agrees Mountain Khakis’ Steve Talacki. “Whenever we open up new retailers we get the staff into Mountain Khakis. We have a program where if the staffer sells five units of Mountain Khakis they get a \$75 gift card for our site, to get them into more of the clothing.”

Like It’s...In The Bag!, Rooten’s Luggage in Irvine, CA, began with travel underwear. “We started out with ExOfficio travel underwear, added their most popular men’s shirt and women’s shirt, then we added Tilley and Wallaroo hats. Now we can outfit the traveler from head to toe,” reports Steve Rooten, who also carries outerwear from UBU, Mycra Pac and Marmot, and Rejuva compression socks.

Clothing is Rooten’s strongest traffic driver. “Clothing really resonates. I keep advertising the category because it’s the one people don’t think about. We’re Rooten’s *Luggage*, so clothing gets the most response because it’s unexpected.” And, in fact, while the author was in Rooten’s store photographing the displays, a woman came in to try on shoes. What brought her in? Rooten’s *Los Angeles Times* ad made her think about travel footwear.

Shoes might seem like a tricky inventory item due to sizing. With clothes it’s small, medium, large, extra-large. With shoes it’s not so simple. Between half-sizes and widths it’s a lot of potential SKUs, but Rooten makes it work without keeping a ton of inventory on hand. “We carry shoes by Propét that retail at \$54.95, which is an impulse price point. At \$79.95 the customer starts to think about whether the shoe goes with their clothes, and it becomes a more complicated decision.” The Washington state-based company has several shoes in its travel series. “They’re very, very lightweight, they

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pack well, and you can throw them into a bag," says Jennifer Sokso, Propét's director of marketing and customer service.

Propét works with retailers to minimize the pain of inventory management. Rooten remembers that, "the sizing was a concern, but all our worries were put to bed. It's two days to get here, there's no minimum, I carry one wide in the store, I can special order shoes and customers are willing to come back. We do taupe and black in six different sizes, from 5.5 to 9 or 10." Propét stocks 400,000 pairs of shoes in its warehouse so orders are filled quickly. "We drop ship to our customers, they can even have them sent directly to the consumer," Sokso explains. "It's helpful to the consumer, and takes some of the stocking burden off the retailer."

Going All In

"We're a travel store, not just a luggage store," relates Bob Bestor, of Travel Essentials. "Our goal from the very beginning was to offer everything that a traveler needs. We're still figuring out exactly what that means – but we're much closer to realizing it now than we were 22 years ago."

Bestor estimates that clothing takes up 50% of his sales floor. "We evolved to this, it started out at 10%," he recalls. "In business terms, clothing sales grew because it's successful. In end user terms, it's stuff customers need when they're traveling." The shop carries ExOfficio and Royal Robbins, Tilley Endurables hats, bamboo-fiber women's clothing from Yala, Darn Tough Vermont socks and SmartWool socks, base layers and sweaters. "For someone starting out, I'd advise them to find out what a brand's core product is, and fill in the gaps in your offerings with best sellers." Inventory control requires awareness and planning. "You have to spend more time, make an advance commitment to clothing," Bestor says. "But after a few years, you get a pretty good idea of what works for your customer."

For Bestor, most of his offerings have an urban flair. "Buyers default to adventure travel outfits, but the reality for our customer is they go to Paris, London, the rest of Western Europe.



Mountain Khakis' technical fabrics are quick-drying, easy care, and strong sellers for It's...In The Bag!



Sockwell's natural cashmerino/bamboo fibers and \$24.99 retail price point make them an easy sell as a more fashionable alternative to traditional compression socks; plus they provide a good margin on a very small footprint.



If you want to go beyond underwear and outerwear, a dressing room is an absolute requirement. It can be done with very little space, and very little investment.

They may go on African safari once in a lifetime, but the other 10 or 20 trips are urban trips." This differentiates Bestor's offerings from the local competition. "We have an outdoor store in town, they outfit for that stuff. We have a different type of customer walking into our store."

John Jacobs, of Tilley Endurables, points to Changes in Latitude in Boulder, CO, for "one of the most beautiful clothing presentations ever," and an example of a travel goods purveyor who's fully embraced the apparel business. "I had an outdoor store before this," says owner Cindy McClelland, "and I sold clothing there too." She figures 75% of the room in

her 3,600-square-foot space is given over to clothing, "but it's mixed in. My thought isn't that you have a luggage section, a clothing section. We're a clothing shop that has luggage, for those with a passion for travel." Besides Tilley her store stocks ExOfficio, Royal Robbins, Nomadic Traders, Sympli the Best and Aventura.

Clothing sales require you to be cognizant of gender differences, not just carry men's and women's clothing. "Women shop totally differently, their clothing's out in the main part of the store with a lot of traffic," McClelland explains. "Our men's clothing is in a separate section. They're two different shoppers: Women don't mind being

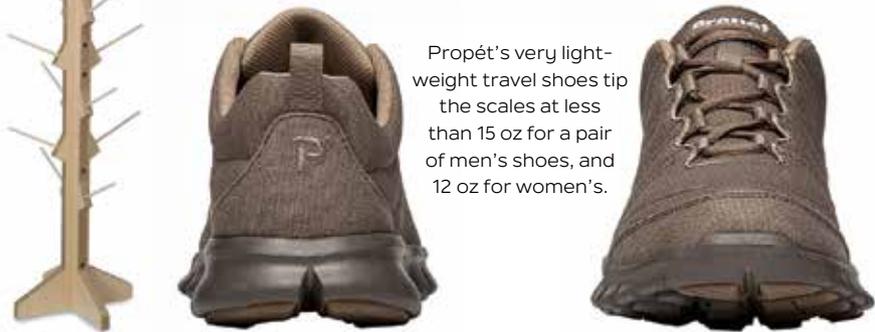


ExOfficio's Give-N-Go underwear is like the gateway drug to get into apparel sales: Easy sell, super functional, tiny space commitment.

Some vendors, like ExOfficio, provide store fixtures or packages that make it easy to break into the apparel segment.



Wallaroo's fun, fashionable headwear is packable and sun-protective, and a good mover for many travel goods retailers.



Propét's very light-weight travel shoes tip the scales at less than 15 oz for a pair of men's shoes, and 12 oz for women's.

tops, so for a travel retailer you have to really front-load those because you can't find them in winter." But then you'll be the only one in town that has them, and your out-of-season inventory will be your competitive advantage over other apparel retailers. "We do really well with outerwear. Here in the desert it's not needed, so lots of places don't stock cold weather wear," reports Howe, of It's...In The Bag! "In rain jackets we carry ExOfficio, Red Ledge, some women's brands like UBU."

One ugly reality of stocking clothing is the sale rack. Rooten acknowledges that markdowns are inevitable, but believes it's part of selling apparel and creates its own opportunities. "We have certain customers who will only buy from the discount rack. They come in looking for the deal, and they might pick up something else while they're in here. And if someone finds the right shirt on the discount rack it becomes an impulse buy."

McClelland sells a lot of technical clothing, but it doesn't look technical. "Quick-dry, wrinkle-free, that's a large part of what makes it packable. But we do a lot of fashionable stuff, too, we don't want our customer to look like a geek. We carry quick-dry lightweight jeans from Toad&Co and Liverpool Jeans. In Europe now they wear jeans all the time, so you can blend in and not look like a tourist."

Blending in is something apparel manufacturer Mountain Khakis has embraced. "You don't have to look like you're wearing a travel shirt," says Sales Manager Steve Talacki. "Try to stay away from the khaki-on-khaki action. You can wear this to the boardroom, on the trail, on the plane, with cross-functionality that doesn't make you look like a traveler."

If clothes make the man, that goes double for the traveler. The right clothing can make the difference between a memorably fun trip, or an uncomfortably memorable experience. Putting clothing into your retail mix improves your ability to have a more positive impact on your customer's journeys, which can win you repeat business and referrals. "I think this is something you have to try out, but it was a natural fit for our store," says Rooten. "I feel like I was a little slow to the punch. After finally doing it, in hindsight I should've been doing this a long time ago." ■

sold to, men don't want to be sold to; they just want to look, ask a few questions, and not be bothered." Gender differences are also reflected in sales. "Generally, we sell more women's clothing than men's. Women layer, they have a top, they want something that goes over it, a jacket, a skirt. Men come in needing a shirt, they'll ask how many colors it comes in and say, 'Okay, I'll take these three.'"

Sizing is a challenge, and while it might be tempting to try and restrict the sizes on hand McClelland feels that's a false strategy. "You can't do that in clothing, not if you want to be successful. People come in all sizes. In women's we carry from size 2 to size

18. Menswear is easier because the range isn't as wide."

Talacki from Mountain Khakis counsels retailers to order complete size runs, then get extras in core sizes. "If you have bigger customers, you'll have to get more in L and XL. If you order just one of every size, if you sell the large you're out of business until it's replaced."

A challenge that's unique to travel retailers is seasonality, but it can also create opportunity. "The whole world is summer or winter all the time, depending on where your destination is," relates McClelland. "Right now our customers are thinking of South America and shorts and tank