

The Numbers Are In - And Khakis Are Out

By Hollie Shaw, National Post

Khaki pants and golf shirts, casual wardrobe staples that defined the business uniform of the late 1990s, are officially out of style, according to the latest market research.

Menswear retailers from high-end Harry Rosen to the mid-priced Moore's have been heralding the return of the business suit since dot-com entrepreneurs became the scourge of Wall Street and the Bush administration banned casual dress in the White House.

And now sales figures prove the trend, says a new report from NPD Group Canada.

Purchases of men's suits jumped 24% in the 12 months ended August 31, after freefalling for several years. Sales hit \$234.6-million for the period, up from \$190-million in 2001, despite a dampening effect the Sept. 11 terror attacks had on apparel retailers countrywide.

Suit sales reached a record peak of \$255-million in 1998 but then wilted until 2001, overtaken by a drive towards the casual work wear.

David Howell, vice-president of NPD, noted several brokerage houses and banks, such as Toronto Dominion, have recently eliminated more relaxed workplace dress codes. "It's been a significant change, and it's started to snowball," he said. "You're not going to call on a bank to do business now in casual pants and a polo shirt, and it filters down from there. It's the end of a cycle." And it's not just happening in the workplace. "A lot of ageing people realize a tailored garment is much kinder to them than a track suit," Mr. Howell said.

Sales of men's khaki pants have dropped 4.3% in the last year to \$444-million, from \$464-million the previous year. Mr. Howell noted dollar sales are declining faster than unit sales, an indication that retailers needed to mark prices down in order to clear out the merchandise.

New stretch fabrics and synthetics have leant a European flavour to casual work clothes, noted Anthony Stokan, a marketing and retail consultant who follows fashion trends. "By virtue of the dramatic change in the tech sector, younger people are going dressier as they try to integrate themselves back into the work force. Those hiring right now aren't completely comfortable with that casual look that defined the tech environment."

Customer buying patterns reflect the trend: NPD noted the greatest growth in tailored suit sales came from men in the 25 to 34 age range, who represented 13.5% of suit buyers last year, compared with 11.6% the previous year.

But it's a mistake to say the end is nigh for casual work wear, Mr. Stokan added. The dressier trend may be "a blip on the radar screen, because men just really favour that casual approach to the work environment."

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