

Suit firm tailored after Dell model

(As seen in Wednesday, Oct. 13, 1999 edition of the Houston Chronicle featured in the Business section)

written by Greg Hassell

As a COLLEGE student at the University of Texas, Timothy Belton became fascinated by the innovative strategy of Austin businessman Michael Dell.

While working on a senior term paper about Dell Computer Corp, Belton realized the genius of making products to order. Dell's business model allows it to avoid the pitfall of making a bunch of stuff no one wants to buy. By mastering the art of customized production, Dell builds its machines on demand and quickly ships them off to customers.

Because the production process is more efficient, Dell was able to offer lower prices than many of the industry's big boys. "It made so much sense to me," Belton said. "You ought to be able to get what you want when you want it."

Belton decided his career path would somehow follow the made-to-order footsteps of Michael Dell. After graduating from UT, Belton went to work for Andersen Consulting, working with companies that needed help with order fulfillments.

As a student at Harvard Business School, he developed what would ultimately become the business plan when he set out on his own.

Apparel is made to order. At age 33, Belton has finally formed his own

business, a company called Express Custom Tailors. His idea is to bring the made-to-order mentality to men's clothing. To help refine the business, Belton hired consultant Robert Sakowitz, who was chairman and CEO of the now-defunct Sakowitz clothing chain. Sakowitz was so impressed with the concept that he has become a partner in the venture.

"We aren't in this to sell a few suits. We are trying to create a process to give people exactly what they want," Sakowitz said. "People are unhappy with what they are buying now. Research has how that 60 percent of men walk out of the store with the feeling their suit doesn't feel right."

The system works like this: A customer visits an Express Custom Tailors location and is measured for 30 separate fitting dimensions. The measurements are entered into a computer, and a proprietary software system creates a digital picture of the customer's body. The measurements are shipped via e-mail to a company owned plant in Cleveland, Ohio, where workers begin making the suit within 24 hours. A completed suit is shipped back within seven to 10 days. The price is \$495 to \$795, a saving of about 33 to 50 percent off similar-quality suits, Sakowitz said.

The savings are the result of a more efficient system, he said. The company estimates one quarter of every dollar of retail sales realized in the suit business is lost because of the cost of mass-produced inventories and markdowns of unsold clothing.

Other companies make custom fitted suits and clothing, he added, but none use high technology as a unifying force to bring together all the pieces of the business puzzle.

"Once you are in our system, you can select another model suit and fabric and order with the click of a button," Sakowitz said.

Broadening of lines seen

The potential rewards could be impressive if Express Custom Tailors can snare even a small portion of the \$170 billion apparel industry in the United States. If sales of men's clothing go well, the company plans to diversify into women's clothing and into sportswear. Right now, the company has one store in downtown Houston, located at 711 Louisiana, and another in Atlanta. The company has a cooperative venture going with Rich's department store. Express Custom Tailors will operate a small department - just large enough to display about 150 different fabrics and a small desk in Rich's men's hop. The first opened in an Atlanta Rich's last month. A second minidepartment will open in another Rich's in Atlanta next month.

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The company has filled more than 400 orders, Sakowitz said, and 80 percent of those orders fit perfectly on the first fitting. It is typical for custom-made garments to need a few last-minute alterations.

Houstonian Richard Pinger heard about Express Custom Tailors from a friend and decided to go into the shop for a look-see. He ended up buying a sports coat that cost \$420 and was completed within a week.

“Usually, a place will tell you a custom made coat will take three or four weeks, and then it really takes a few weeks longer than that,” Pinger said. “This coat fits me perfectly. I was surprised it fits as well as it does...I think this has a lot of potential, and I’ve recommended the place to several of my friends.”

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