

Clothes That Fit the Woman, Not the Store

By Michael Barbaro

March 31, 2006

It is a noble pursuit that has long eluded the clothing industry: a standardized sizing system that would allow consumers to navigate the frustrating world of off-the-rack apparel, where size varies from retailer to retailer.

But a closely watched experiment, under way at two national apparel companies, highlights just how hard it may be to pull off.

One obstacle is that retailers, ever eager to distinguish themselves, are loath to share anything, even if it might help their customers.

Fit Technologies, which is owned by a Dallas entrepreneur, has developed a sizing system based on three body types that represent the most common female figures. Clothing companies that adopt it produce three versions of every size, one for each body shape.

Jones Apparel and Garfield & Marks quietly applied the system to a handful of lines, and three retailers, Macy's, Nordstrom and Q.V.C., the television shopping network, agreed to carry limited quantities of the products.

Despite the endorsement from big-name companies, the system faces enormous challenges. Retailers that commit to it must find space for more merchandise, train workers to understand the new sizes and explain the new system to customers -- a struggle for stores that already have few employees on the sales floor.

Then there is the reality, however counterintuitive it may be, that retailers and clothing makers thrive off sizing confusion. Consumers who find a brand that fits are likely to stick with it and a standard sizing system would encourage them to visit other stores.

So perhaps it is unsurprising that the sizing system, called Fitlogic, has hit some bumps in the road. Macy's, which stocked a single style of Jones New York pants made with the Fitlogic sizing system, said it would cease carrying the line. And Nordstrom, which is carrying a single style of pants from Garfield & Marks, said it had no plans to expand use of the sizing system.

Both companies declined to disclose sales figures for the clothes using the Fitlogic sizing system, as did Q.V.C. and Jones Apparel, with executives saying it was too early to tell.

Nancy Jones, vice president for marketing at Garfield & Marks, said customer feedback on the Fitlogic system was positive but that "we have not figured out how to get this concept out to our stores in a fashion they can accept financially and commit to in terms of space." There is little doubt that consumers would benefit from Fitlogic, or any other standardized sizing system, if it were widely adopted. Size, by definition a standardized measure, has become one of the most flexible concepts in retailing.

The creation of vanity sizes -- intentionally smaller than an objective size, to flatter the buyer -- has introduced pure guesswork into shopping. A size 10 from one clothing manufacturer is a size 8 from another and a 12 from still another.

According to a survey of 84,000 women, conducted by the NPD Group, a market research firm, 36 percent return a product every year because it does not fit. Those returns equal 12 percent of all clothing sales.

As a result, industry executives say, women shop at fewer stores and buy fewer clothes than they would if sizing were more transparent.

Julia Pierson, 46, from Baltimore, buys pants from one company, Jones New York, because it is the only brand that produces a size 12 that fits her. "My waist is disproportionately large," said Ms. Pierson, who was shopping in the Jones New York department at Macy's Herald Square, wearing a pair of Jones New York corduroy pants.

Fitlogic is not the first company to tackle the sizing riddle. In the mid-1990's Levi Strauss developed a system that allowed consumers to order jeans cut precisely to their measurements. Using a different approach, a company called Intellefitt designed scanning machines that took shoppers' measurements -- including shoulder slope and calf thickness -- in stores. And Neiman Marcus provides a kind of CliffsNotes to sizes in its catalogs.

But an industrywide solution has never materialized.

The developer of Fitlogic is Cricket Lee, who has frequently expressed her own frustration with clothing sizes. On Q.V.C.'s Web site, Ms. Lee describes herself as a 52-year-old who weighs 245 pounds, adding, "Like many women, I was unable to find clothing that fit and I was sick and tired of it." Ms. Lee declined to comment for this article.

According to Fit Technology, more than 90 percent of women over 35 fall into three body types: straight silhouette, curvy and pearlike, which the company labels 1, 2 and 3. Fitlogic pairs traditional sizes with its three body types, producing a tag with sizes like 10.2 and 8.3.

But what would make the system appealing to shoppers -- multiple versions of the same size -- is what turns off retailers and clothing makers. Three times the number of items requires more display space and creates more risk of unsold inventory. "A small boutique cannot support a program like this," Ms. Jones of Garfield & Marks said.

The retailers that could support such a program may not want to. For many, proprietary sizing, however frustrating, is a vital part of a brand's identity.

"A Seven Jeans fit is different from a Gap jeans fit," said Andrew Jassin, managing director of the Jassin-O'Rourke Group, a fashion consulting firm in New York. "They don't want it to be the same."

The system also creates more work for clothing manufacturers. To make one pair of pants using Fitlogic sizing, Garfield & Marks, which designs clothes by hand, had to create three patterns. "The concept behind this is legitimate and needed by consumers," Ms. Jones said. "But it is very challenging to be an innovator on a concept like this."

The industry appears to be taking a wait-and-see approach. Even Macy's, which agreed to test the system, has done little to advertise it.

The Jones Apparel pants using Fitlogic sizing hang on a single, unmarked rack in a corner of Macy's Herald Square store in Manhattan. On a recent evening, a saleswoman in the Jones New York department where the pants are sold said she was unfamiliar with the product or where it was sold in the store.