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Guys, Need a Lift?

Skivvy sales did, so designers stole Victoria's secrets.

By RAMIN SETOODEH

Arnie Bautista buys designer underwear by the bunch. "For me, it's an investment," says the 31-year-old advertising executive from New York. "I like to look really good out of my clothes." He spends up to \$350 a season on expensive stretchy shorts from brands like 2xist ("to exist"), Calvin Klein and Ginch Gonch, a Canadian retailer that sells little briefs with prints of stars and firetrucks. He has 50 or 60 pairs—so many, that he's run out of shelf space for all those drawers. About the only kind of undies he doesn't own? "I don't wear Fruit of the Loom," he says.

It wasn't long ago that guys had only two choices in the morning: boxers or briefs, usually both in white. But in a metrosexual age, sexy skivvies in a rainbow of colors have become the hot new fashion accessory. Much like Victoria's Secret and Frederick's of Hollywood did with women's lingerie in the '80s, upstart companies like 2xist and C-in2 (pronounced "see into"), along with stalwarts like Jockey and Calvin Klein, are selling designer (read: pricey) undies to the masses—and raking in the bucks.

In a slumping fashion market, sales of men's undergarments climbed 14 percent to \$3.6 billion last year from \$3.1 billion in 2004, according to the market research firm NPD Group. Sales of women's panties were up only 7.7 percent, to \$3.1 billion from \$2.9 billion in 2004. (Of course, those figures don't include other undergarments women buy, including bras.) Scores of companies, including most of the big designer labels, are now into men's underwear, compared to just a handful of players a decade ago: FreshPair, a top selling site for shorts on the Web, carries 37 different brands. Most telling of all: 67 percent of men buy their own underwear now. It used to be that 80 percent of men's underwear was purchased by women, reports industry leader Jockey.

Thank "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and its ilk for making men more willing to get their sexy on. Julie Hornburg, director of sales for intimates at Diesel, says men have begun to consider underwear an "event purchase"—something special to don on Saturday night. "They want to have nice underwear on, for when they finally drop their pants," she says. Helping guys look sexier with pants *on* is also a big selling point. "We have a customer from Wall Street that swears by our thong because he doesn't want a visible panty line," says Jason Zambuto, cofounder of C-in2, which packages its briefs in colors named after food flavors like blueberry and limeade. C-in2's "Sling" brief provides a lift similar to the Wonder Bra and has been a major hit since its introduction two years ago, with 500,000 pair sold in stores like Saks and Bloomingdale's. This year, C-in2 unveiled a marvel of underwear engineering that's even more gravity-defying: the Trophy Shelf.



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Indeed, companies are devising ever more exotic—and expensive—offerings. Dolce & Gabbana sells camouflage "Combat" briefs for \$38 a pair. Paul Frank can suit you up with "Butt huggers" for \$28. And men who sip soy lattes can now pick up soy shorts from 2xist. No, they're not edible, but they're "environmentally friendly," UV protected, and they'll set you back \$20 a pair. "It feels like cashmere," company designer Jason Scarlatti says of the briefs, which are made from soybean fibers and spandex. The success of the racy upstarts has the giants adjusting their shorts. "The consumers are more knowledgeable," says Paula Barnes, director of men's merchandising at Jockey, "and they are paying attention to additional features." Jockey recently introduced a new "3D innovations" line, at \$14 a brief, that stretches in eight different directions (don't ask). The spring line comes in wild colors, including three shades of orange, a hue that's usually a tough sell in men's undies. Jockey is also slowly weaning gents from two industry standards: the color white, and the fly. Today, 38 percent of the underwear it sells is colored, and 15 percent is flyless. "Our consumer research tells us there is a customer out there who doesn't use the fly and doesn't want the fly," says Barnes. Those must be the same guys who want the Trophy Shelf.

About Freshpair.com

Freshpair is a leading internet retailer of men's and women's intimate apparel, offering hundreds of styles of bras, panties, shapewear, t-shirts, boxers, briefs, trunks, socks, sleepwear and more. From petite to full-figure, shapewear to thongs, boxers to briefs and everything in between, we are the ultimate destination for intimate apparel shopping. Freshpair.com carries a wide selection of the major brand names for men and women including: 2(x)ist, C-IN2, Calvin Klein, Wacoal, Chantelle, Le Mystere and Bali.