

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/lifestyle/312760_underwear24.html

More men are opting for sexy, fun underwear

Tuesday, April 24, 2007

By **DAVID COLMAN**
THE NEW YORK TIMES

When Steven Lien, a one-time ski-shop proprietor and information technology specialist in Portland, dreamed up a small-business venture last year, his friends and family were not even polite about what they thought of his prospects.

"Everyone was like, 'There's no way that will work,' " Lien recalled.

Now, almost five months since Under U 4 Men opened its doors on Broadway in the heart of downtown Portland's business district, Lien could open a restaurant just to serve humble pie. Instead, he is planning two more branches, including one in Seattle. His small specialty store, which sells only novel or little-known brands of men's underwear, has outperformed even his own forecast.

"The store was profitable within 30 days," he said. "And I didn't open on Gay Street, USA. I opened on Main Street, USA."

Novelty underwear, for decades the butt of jokes, has, in the past two to three years, turned into a serious business, capturing a significant share of the \$1.1 billion men's knit-underwear (that is, excluding boxers) market. In all their goofy glory, briefs in bright colors, zany prints, new materials and daring cuts are undermining the classic white brief's long-held status as king of the hill. In 2006, white's share of the market dipped below 50 percent for the first time in decades, if not ever.

It is hard to believe, so eyebrow-raisingly offbeat, and atypically masculine, are many of the selections. The cheery rainbow of colors, 20 in all, from American Apparel. The low-low rise of Go Softwear briefs. Bamboo fabric from C-IN2 and soy-based fabric from 2(x)ist. Oversize race-car prints from Diesel. Soccer graphics in Andrew Christian's new line. Groovy 1970s-sunset supergraphics on Frank Dandy Superwear. And, unlikeliest

of all, the little-boy, Underoos-inspired nuttiness of fire trucks, motorcycles and hot dogs all over Ginch Gonch underwear -- they're fairly crying out to be called underpants.

Lien, of Under U 4 Men, plans to open a Seattle store in December.

"It's probably going to be one of our best stores. We're going to make it twice the size of our Portland store," said Lien, who added that Bellevue is another location he's considering for a future opening.

The Seattle store will carry 35 brands, including many unusual international labels such as Giulio (Spanish);



CHRIS SHIPMAN/ THE NEW YORK TIMES

Novelty underwear, for decades the butt of jokes and the joke of butts, has, in the past two to three years, turned into a serious business, capturing a significant share of the \$1.1 billion mens knit-underwear (excluding boxers) market.

Bruno Banani (German) and Aussie Bum (Australia). These undies retail from \$6 to \$45, with an average price of \$22.50.

It will feature the in-house fashion shows -- some with wine tastings -- that have been popular in Portland.

Not since the Peacock Revolution of the '60s has there been such variety, all of it going to disprove a cherished maxim of menswear: that a man is more loyal to his brand of underwear than to any other article of clothing. Now connoisseurship trumps loyalty. Once-tentative customers now log on to sites such as InternationalJock.com, one of the most comprehensive men's underwear Web sites, selling brands such as Justus Boyz, Wax, Play, Kyle and Artificial Flavor.



Frank Daddy Superwear, left; Dsquared, center and right.

As they say, it's all about packaging. For American Apparel, that means marketing that is a clash of squeaky clean and slightly raunchy. Picture an unshowered, unshaven guy in a pair of pink briefs with white piping, photographed amateur-style, and you get the idea. Using such imagery, American Apparel has sold more than a million of its briefs in the two years since they were introduced, said Dov Charney, the line's founder. "They're one of our best-selling products now," he said.

And the wacky Web site for Ginch Gonch (the name is taken from Canadian slang for underwear) offers a YouTube-style wedgie contest and scads of naughty double entendres. The racy-goofy approach is working: Ginch Gonch sold 1.8 million pairs of underwear last year at about \$30 each, said Jason Sutherland, the line's owner, who said he expects to double that volume in 2007.

"They're getting away from the old pasty colors," said Maurice Webb, an infrastructure contractor and an Army veteran based in Iraq, who stumbled onto the Justus Boyz site when searching for new underwear. "They've got a lot of fun stuff now. They're taking notice that there are stylish, daring people out there."

At first the site -- and name -- made him nervous, but the desert camo briefs he bought were a hit. "I got a lot of compliments," he said. "They're more form-fitting, and they're also more comfortable."

His reaction would seem to be shared by many. From 2004 to 2006, sales of men's knit underwear rose 5.3 percent, to 397 million pairs, according to NPD Group, which tracks clothing trends. The gains were from styles in patterns (up 23 percent, to 48 million pairs) and solid colors (also up 23 percent, to 156 million), including the blacks and grays that mainstream makers such as Calvin Klein and Hanes added to their lines. Similarly, sales of traditional briefs were down while non-traditional styles -- boxer briefs, bikinis and thong styles -- were all up.

"It's becoming very exciting," said Marshal Cohen, the chief analyst at NPD. "For a long time it seemed like, if you wanted to wear briefs, you couldn't have any personality."

The big losers offsetting the gains? White underwear styles fell 9.4 percent in the past two years.

And because underwear is one of the few forms of men's wear that women buy more of (for men) than men do, Cohen said the trend would likely continue as the boyfriends and husbands start to replacement-shop for themselves.

Daniel Fogg, 27, a marketing manager in Portland who had shopped on Internet sites until he discovered Under U 4 Men, appreciates packaging that is less body-obsessed. "That's one of the differences with the newer brands," he said. "It's not so oversexualized. It can be approached as something fun to shop for at the same time that you buy a pair of shoes or jeans."

P-I reporter Kristin Dizon contributed to this story.

© 1998-2007 Seattle Post-Intelligencer