

PROFILES IN COURAGE

The challenges facing independent menswear stores specializing in B&T are innumerable. Still, many battle on, and some are even profitable.

The future seems tenuous for independent B&T merchants: industry powerhouses dominate more of the market, online outpaces brick & mortar by far, and rising rents and wages have increasingly eroded the bottom line. As a result, many independents are begging to be bought out by The Foundry or DXL, some have merged with like-minded competitors, others have sadly closed up shop. But miraculously, some are thriving, based on a winning combination of trend-right fashion, in-stock sizes, on-line marketing and exceptional tailors. *MR* interviewed several members of the BATA group to learn their survival strategies.

late 60's. Today the 10,000 square foot specialty store is run by Fred's son Sam and two of his star associates who share ownership.

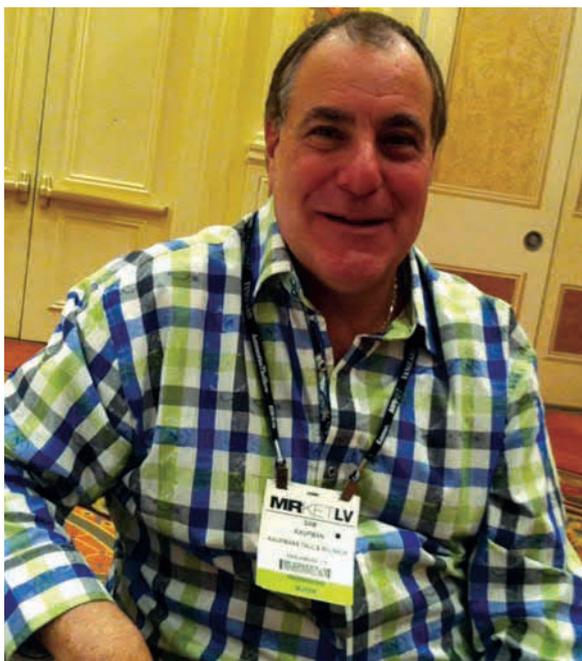
Sam Kaufman sees several key issues facing his family's company. For starters, he suffers from the perennial problem of B&T retailers: finding new and innovative product at affordable prices. "Few vendors want to make so many sizes. Enro offers 27 different styles of non-iron dress shirts, yet only carries stock in blue and white." He also worries about how to connect with a younger customer who isn't accessible via the traditional advertising channels. "It's challenging and expensive: there's no handbook on how to do on-

the best taste level, the best of each brand. It's a blending, a harmony, a symphony of the great stuff out there, which guys will not find from a single vendor store or website."

Kaufman's best advice to new B&T vendors: "Give it three years or it will fail: the first year you test, then test again, then you can commit."

Hajjar's Big & Tall, Quincy, Massachusetts

Steve Hajjar is carrying on the family business started by his father 55 years ago. His store offers a wide selection, with more than 65 size choices for suits alone. Brands such as Tommy Bahama, Cutter & Buck, and Enro are staples.



"I offer service, style, value, selection, and quality but ironically, quality means the clothes last longer and customers don't need to replace as often..." —Sam Kaufman, Kaufman's

line business." And yet with sportswear taking up a larger portion of the market, he would like to bring in young professionals to boost his clothing sales.

Educating the B&T customer presents another challenge altogether. "I offer service, style, value, selection and quality," says Kaufman. "Some stores take out 50 percent of the make and take off 30 percent of the price—not a good deal. My dad always said it's great to make a dollar, but better to make a customer."

Although he says he's being well taken care of, especially by Tommy Bahama, what worries him the most is competition from his vendors. Bottom line, says Kaufman: "We independents are important because we offer

Hajjar's has operated a successful online version of the store since 1992, but has noticed a growing amount of new B&T websites springing up in recent years. Even with all this competition, Hajjar's broad assortments have kept them a destination store.

Parks Big & Tall, Rockford, Illinois

After almost two decades of operating as a regular size men's store, Park's switched to exclusively Big & Tall just three years ago. Key brands include Grand River, Savane and Chaps. According to the owner Clay Lutz, the main difficulty of B&T lies in the smaller client base and more limited range of colors and styles available to retailers. He hopes in the future that B&T manufacturers will adopt more creative styling and color palettes instead of sticking to safe options like pullover sweaters in neutral shades.

Kaufman's Tall and Big Shop, Englewood, Colorado

Founded in 1958 by Fred Kaufman (who, incidentally, was instrumental in the formation of the American Basketball Association), Kaufman's began specializing in Big & Tall in the

Lil' John's Big & Tall Men's Fashion, Pensacola, Florida

Change doesn't scare John Thomas, owner of Lil' John's in Pensacola. The store is on its third iteration as a B&T specialty retailer: first White's, then Jack's, and since January 2013, Lil' John's. The latest name change has been publicized via a focused advertising campaign across multiple channels, including online. Says Thomas, "We are constantly promoting online and in different advertising media. We use these to educate our customers about differences in quality and fit." Thomas credits his competitive edge to a greater selection of sizes than most B&T stores: pants go up to an 80 inch waist size as opposed to the more common 50 inch maximum. He's also constantly

David Barry's Tall & Big, Birmingham, Alabama

The business is more than 100 years old, gradually evolving from custom tailoring to regular sizes to B&T for the past 30 years. According to David Barry, thanks to e-mail marketing and a lot of gift cards, the store has become a fashion destination for Big & Tall Southern men. Key brands include Polo, Tommy Bahama, Cutter & Buck and many more. And unlike most B&T stores, their emphasis is more tall than big since this has proven to be a more fashion-forward customer. Barry also points out that their full alterations service has proven to be a valuable asset in addition to their broad inventory in all sizes: seven in big and seven in tall.



adding new brands, most recently Cutter & Buck, Cooper Jones and Lucky. Another challenge according to Thomas is "teaching our customer that just because a piece of clothing is a few dollars less doesn't make it a bargain when you will just have to replace it sooner."

Josephs Men's Store, San Antonio, Texas

A third-generation family business, Josephs Men's Store has been carrying B&T since 1980 (60/40 big/tall). The store continues to grow due to its strong advertising (direct mail, e-mail, newspaper for seasonal sales and special events) and broad selection of great brands including Tori Richard, Cutter & Buck and Enro (their non-iron dress shirts are a hot item!) According to Steve Rubin, it's always a challenge finding more upscale and fashionable options in the B&T market. Another challenge is turn, which is why they don't carry 5x or larger and stop at 22/39 in dress shirts.

"The B&T market needs better delivery of more up-to-date fashion. We always seem to be a year or two behind a trend."

—Mike Gavalas, Nic's Big and Tall

G&L Clothing, Des Moines, Iowa

In 1981, G&L Clothing was bought by the Marcovis Store for Men creating the new G&L. The store carries work and casual clothing in both regular and B&T sizes. Frank Marcovis shares his frustration that few well-known brands are enthusiastic about doing B&T and will often

discontinue manufacturing certain styles before they even have a chance to perform. That said, G&L continues to run a lucrative business because of their online presence and broad and deep assortments, especially in-depth offerings from Levi's, Wrangler and Carhartt.

M.H. Grover & Sons, Ltd., Quebec, Canada

A third-generation family business founded in 1925, M.H. Grover & Sons, Ltd. began selling B&T apparel 15 years ago. Their customers (4 to 1, big to tall) love labels like Buffalo, Columbia, Luchiano Visconti, Jack Victor, Tommy Bahama and Callaway. Kenny Grover confides that business has been flat the past few years because of the increase in online competition and a trend for customers to buy only what they need. "Getting people through the door is the hardest part of the business," he insists. "With everything online, people compare prices and buy where it's cheapest."

In hopes that more publicity will mean more sales, the store has recently hired a company to revamp their website and handle all aspects of social media. "Traditional advertising in this market is a waste of money," Grover maintains.

Jonathon Charles Menswear, Derby, England

With seven locations throughout England, Jonathon Charles Menswear has made a name for itself as the premier British retailer for B&T apparel (75 percent big, 25 percent tall). Store owner and founder Charles Kofler started the business 28 years ago and it now carries an impressive selection of brands including Merrell, Marc Ecko, Fox Fire, F/X Fusion and Nike (their most consistent label). They also do a strong private label business in suits and trousers. Kofler told MR that although his stores are small compared to other B&T retailers, he makes sure to have an extensive size range. He wishes B&T vendors would push the envelope to develop more fashion-forward styles.

Austins Big & Tall, Maryland & Virginia

Going strong since 1996, Austins Big & Tall relies on e-mail marketing to reach their mailing list of over 8,000 customers. "We've found e-mail to be much more effective than direct mail," says founder Mike Cohen. With upscale brands like Jack Victor, Peter Millar, Tommy Bahama, Hart Schaffner Marx, Robert Talbott and Cutter & Buck, they cater to a clientele that's 65 percent big, 35 per-

cent tall. Cohen suggests that B&T manufacturers need to implement more consistent sizing and specs in order to alleviate confusion. He sees his two main challenges as customer acquisition and competing with vendors who sell direct.

Nic's Big & Tall, Tallahassee, Florida

They started downtown as an all-size discount store in the mid-'70s, then moved out near the malls and converted to B&T. According to Mike Gavalas, a critical issue is slow turn. "With so many sizes, it's really a challenge to maintain a reasonable turn. We need to limit our sizes or fill in more frequently, which can be a problem since few vendors keep backstock for reorders. Therefore we limit a bit: we might be less diverse than some stores, but we maintain a 3x turn."

Gavalas also claims that finding good quality is getting more difficult each season. "Our buying group helps, but the diversity of taste levels makes it very hard to get products made."

Confiding that business has been a roller coaster, Gavalas points out a bright spot: custom clothing and shirts. "We've been working with a firm on re-branding our company and getting us on social media and advertising. We've started building a social network, sending out lots of information. We've had good feedback: people are starting to respond and like what they see." Key brands at Nic's are Jack Victor, Ralph Lauren, Ike Behar, Michael Kors, Enro, Robert Talbott, Polo, Tommy Bahama, Lacoste, Ballin and more; they go for broad assortments and shallow depth.

Straus Clothing, Fargo, North Dakota

In business since 1879 and marketing B&T for the past 30 years, John Stern describes the challenges of B&T as similar to those faced in regular sizes. These include finding products that are fashionable, affordable and not in the big box stores, and competing with the rapidly expanding online business. "This does not bode well for small retailers or sales tax revenues for states, as internet sites for the most part do not collect sales tax." He's found that his customers (80/20 tall/big: "lots of Scandinavian giants around here.") are huge fans of Tommy Bahama, as well as Savane, Enro, River Road and Cutter & Buck. Wrinkle-free cotton sport shirts are a key item.

In terms of marketing, Stern feels that radio and phone calls work best. "Social media is new and the jury's still out. It gets to be a nuisance if you're old like me."

Thaku's Men's Wear, Phoenix and Peoria, Arizona

Established in 1969, the store today is run by the three sons of the founder. It's evolved into special sizes (including 15 percent short). Their heritage is custom so they understood those guys who have the most difficulty with fit. "Ten years ago we had it pretty easy," confides Neil Vaswani. "But since Men's Warehouse and the big department stores have invaded the B&T arena, it's tough to survive. We keep bringing in better quality brands



"Cool brands like Nike are always strong, but we tend to concentrate on our own Jonathon Charles label."

—Charles Kofler, Jonathon Charles Menswear

(Jack Victor, Tommy Bahama, Cutter & Buck, Tori Richard, S. Cohen), and we try to balance the mix with good promotions."

In addition to the overall economy, Vaswani blames tough business on the widespread trend to more casual dressing. "Fortunately, we had the fortitude to purchase both of our buildings, which are paid in full so the big overhead has been eliminated. We're also launching a new website to compete with the Goliaths."

Jim's Tall and Big, Odessa, Texas

According to David Simpson, Texas has the tallest population in the Union and their sales are therefore 7:1, tall to big. Although his mix is decidedly moderate (Nautica, Cutter & Buck, Callaway, Izod, Chaps, Levis, Dockers, Lucky, Allsize), the store is considered "better" by its

customers who are gradually trading up. Hot lines now include Robert Graham, Luchiano Visconti and Tailor Byrd.

Simpson says his biggest challenge is the need to carry so many (16) sizes. "Every 3XT is different so you need to know which run long or short. In the B&T department at Dillard's, they offer four sizes; we're dealing with four times as many."

While he admits that his store, opened in 1973 when his six-foot five-inch dad couldn't find clothes that fit, lags behind in social media (their website, at the moment, is frozen), he's invested in cable television with some good results. They also use direct mail before their end-season clearance sales.

On Simpson's wish list: "I wish vendors would narrow down their offerings, focusing on successful styles from previous seasons, so it would be easier to make their minimums. Yes, our customers like fashion, but I'd rather see their 10 best items that we might actually

get shipped rather than 27 fashion items that we'll never receive. Making minimums is a real problem for independent stores."

Baroni Tall & Big, Merritt Island, Florida

With a customer base comprising many retirees, Nancy Sharp keeps her pricing affordable. She and her husband Bruce (a cabinet maker turned tailor) are selling lots of Dockers, Levi action slacks and Hawaiian print shirts (Highway One). In sport shirts it's more bigs than tall; in dress shirts more tall than bigs. "The skinny look has been terrible for us," Sharp confides. "A few vendors downsized their specs (dress shirts an inch shorter and narrower) and it's been a disaster." On her wish list: more beach-y type T-shirts that don't feature snakes or skulls. ■