

SUNDAY
JUNE 6, 2004

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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
NATIONAL / INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Sunday, June 6, 2004

Keeping stains and creases at bay is in style

This season, consumers are gladly paying more for clothes made of hassle-free fabric.

By Anne D'Innocenzio
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — One of the hottest trends in clothes this spring isn't apparent until the garments come out of the washer and dryer.

Stain-resistant and wrinkle-free shirts, pioneered by companies such as Levi Strauss & Co.'s Dockers brand and Liz Claiborne Inc., are being marketed by a growing number of retailers ranging from mass-market chains such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to upscale merchants such as Paul Stuart. More consumers are demanding clothing that is hassle-free, and a wide variety of retailers and manufacturers are responding.

"You are going to see the lowest of the low to the highest of the high," said Marshal Cohen, senior industry analyst at NPD Group Inc., a market research company in Port Washington, N.Y.

Cohen estimates that about 25 percent of apparel is now made of easy-care fabrics, and he expects that figure to grow to 50 percent in the next few years - even though those garments tend to be more expensive than similar merchandise without care-free features.

"If it is not wrinkle-free, I just don't buy it," said Rebecca O'Meara, of New Orleans, who is willing to pay an extra \$20 per item.

She said she had purchased wrinkle-free shirts and stain-resistant pants from retailers including Lands' End, J.C. Penney Co. Inc., and Target's namesake discount division.

Several big-name newcomers launched

hassle-free clothing lines this spring:

Wal-Mart has T-shirts, tanks and shorts for men under the Hanes brand that release stains when washed, its first foray into care-free clothing. It also now offers wrinkle-resistant, short-sleeved shirts under its own store brand, Puritan.

Gap Inc. has launched a stain- and wrinkle-resistant collection of shirts and pants for men. "Male customers are responding incredibly well," said spokeswoman Erica Archambault.

Shirt-maker Phillips-Van Heusen Corp. began selling stain-repellent dress shirts under its Geoffrey Beene, Van Heusen and Arrow brands, accounting for 20 percent of its styles. Ellen Constantinides, president of the shirt division, expects that figure to climb to 40 percent this fall.

Paul Stuart, whose suits average \$1,200, now has stain-repellent tailored suits as well as jackets and pants that are sold separately. It is now looking into stain-repellent clothing for women, spokeswoman Selma Nasser said.

The trend was made possible by new fabric technology from companies such as Greensboro, N.C.-based Nano-Tex L.L.C., whose customers include Eddie Bauer, Gap, Old Navy and Perry Ellis.

Nano-Tex uses chemical processes to give fabric its care-free qualities. With garments that repel liquid stains, for example, the process includes heating the fabric to bond

polymers, or molecules, to each fiber. That forms a barrier around the fibers without compromising the feel of the garment, allowing for wine and other liquid stains to simply roll off.

Fritz Winans, group president of Liz Claiborne brands, estimated the treatments add about \$6 to \$10 on average to the price of a garment, but he said consumers were willing to spend the extra money - with some exceptions, such as basic knit tops.

Others such as Phillips-Van Heusen say they have been able to absorb the extra cost and have not passed it on to shoppers.

With the increasing competition, pioneers of the trend acknowledge they have to work even harder to stay ahead. One way is bundling all the technologies together when producing a shirt or a pair of pants.

This year, Levi's Dockers - which came out with what it calls Stain Defender khakis for men at the end of 2001 - introduced the Dockers ProStyle brand in shirts, ties and pants, which offers a combination of treatments. For example, Dockers ProStyle shirts not only whisk moisture away from the body, they are also odor- and stain-resistant. "We are constantly coming up with new things that consumers don't know that they need," said Andrea Corso, a Dockers spokeswoman.

Corso declined to offer current sales figures, but said the company sold more than five times the original forecast of its Stain Defender khakis in the first season.

At Liz Claiborne, Winans said the company's care-free products should be at least a \$500 million business in the next five years. The company generated sales of \$4.2 billion last year. ■