



# Is This the Most Trusted Man in Fashion?



Federated department stores like Macy's carry Donald J. Trump's line of clothes. He wears them, but he hasn't given up his Brioni.

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YOU probably didn't notice, what with all the excitement about the return of "Project Runway," the release of a survey by a marketing company last week noting that [Donald J. Trump](#) had beat out Giorgio Armani and Donna Karan as one of the most trusted fashion names in America. That's right: Donald Trump, the real estate mogul, television star, hair aesthete and confessed "germ freak." Even the editors of Women's Wear Daily seemed to be in a state of disbelief, since their report of the news was buried on the inside.

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Jerry Avenaim/Corbis Outline

Donald Trump ranks high with consumers.

It couldn't be true. Mr. Armani has worked his fingers to the bone to be a world-renowned designer; spent a fortune advancing the idea too. And what about Valentino, Karl Lagerfeld, Stella McCartney and those boys - what are their names? - Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana? They don't even make the list. Shut out of America. Ignored. Trumped. It's true.

The Donald J. Trump collection of suits, ties and dress shirts has been available for the last year at Macy's and other Federated department stores, a couple of hundred outlets in all. Terry J. Lundgren, the chief executive of Federated, has characterized the Trump apparel business as "an unbelievable runaway success." Mr. Trump doesn't design the clothes, he doesn't make them, and he doesn't spend a dime to promote them. And unlike most designers, he doesn't expend any effort trying to convince the American public that a billionaire, the keeper of Mar-a-Lago, the defender of capitalist culture, would dump his \$5,000 Brioni suits in favor of his own \$495 make. He wears his suits, which are

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produced for a royalty by a firm called Marcraft, but he also wears the other.

"I like Brioni; they treat me fantastically," Mr. Trump said last Friday from Florida, where he was watching a women's golf tournament at one of his clubs.

He may have been surprised himself to learn that he had done in a year of light lifting what has taken Ralph Lauren nearly 40 years to accomplish. That is, according to the survey, by Brand Keys, a marketing company in New York, his brand is seen as having the qualities that consumers most desire in clothes, namely comfort, style and fit. Brand Keys asked 500 adults, chosen from the nine census regions, to rate a total of 1,200 brands, ranging from banks and fast-food chains to apparel and consumer electronics.

Out of 50 fashion brands, however, only five ranked in the top category, called Human Brands, which simply meant that whether you hailed from a red state or a blue one, said "tomato" or "tumaytuh," you recognized values beyond the commoditized subsoil of price. The five were Chanel, Ralph Lauren, Isaac Mizrahi, Victoria's Secret and, of course, Donald Trump.

A number of designer labels fell into a next-best category, called 21st-Century Brands, which suggested that names like Prada, Armani and Versace also resonated with consumers but without the same degree of meaning as the Human types. The inclusion in a third, more lowly category, Label, of Anne Klein, Bill Blass and Calvin Klein points up the staying power of a name long after the company's founder has died or retired and its product has struggled to be relevant.

"Anne Klein you can find, if you look hard enough," said David Wolfe, the creative director of Doneger Group, which forecasts retail trends.

Robert Passikoff, the president of Brand Keys, said research indicated that Chanel got a boost from the celebrity of Nicole Kidman, whereas "[Madonna](#) negatively impacted Versace" after she appeared in its ads. Apparently respondents didn't buy the link between the feeble pop star and the brand, any more than they believed that Sarah Jessica Parker, fresh from "Sex and the City," shopped at the Gap.

Mr. Passikoff said that Victoria's Secret has managed to "humanize" its brand, and Mr. Mizrahi has benefited by his association with Target, though Mr. Trump wonders if it isn't really because Mr. Mizrahi appeared twice on "The Apprentice."

Although Mr. Trump represents a type of success that is clear and compelling to many Americans, Mr. Passikoff said "there were serendipitous events that surrounded him." His reality show and the clothing brand hit just at the moment when more young men were beginning to dress up for work; sales of suits increased 34 percent in 2004, halting an eight-year decline.

That only one designer, Mr. Lauren, made it into the top category on the strength of his own steam is interesting, though. It says to Mr. Passikoff, and perhaps everyone else, that designers are not the cultural symbols we suppose them to be.

"They rely on the old marketing model, which is, 'If you know my name, you'll go out and buy my products,'" he said. "Things have changed dramatically. Those rules were set back in the early ages of marketing, from 1955 to 1975. Designers haven't looked to see how the consumer has changed."

You can understand the consumer - and, in essence, modern marketing - by playing a simple word-association game, Mr. Passikoff suggests. "You ask someone what Mercedes means, they say, 'Luxury.' You say BMW, and they go, 'Engineering.' Toyota? 'Reliability.' You say Pontiac and they go, 'Uh.'" He paused. "The 'uh' is the sound of a dying brand."

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Asked how designers might feel to learn that Trump and not Prada struck more meaning with consumers, Mr. Trump answered mildly: "I don't think they would be happy. It's not my first job."

He said that when he first discussed a suit line with Sheldon Brody, the chairman of Marcraft, he naïvely thought it would retail for \$5,000. "Then it was explained to me by Terry Lundgren that .001 percent of the population spends that much for a suit." You can only imagine how often that reality has been spelled out to young designers.

Mr. Trump continued: "I think a lot of people like what I like. I don't want to have shirts with sagging collars. I know what people want, whether it's a building or a shirt."

Mr. Trump may not know, but he believes he does, with a childlike simplicity, which seems to help keep his message in front of consumers: If you wear my shirt, you will look successful. Designers, by contrast, seem happier talking in abstract terms like "quality" and "creativity."

Maybe they think this is the sort of thing that editors like to hear, but the terms usually produce the opposite effect in consumers. "Uh."

Of course it helps Mr. Trump that he is on television, but as he points out, any number of famous people, including Tommy Hilfiger and [Martha Stewart](#), have done reality shows without connecting in a real way with consumers. One reason may be that Mr. Trump doesn't shrink before the comedy of his own act: the wives, the grandeur of the lifestyle, the hair.

"He's a camp icon and also a very American icon," said Simon Doonan, the creative director of Barneys New York.

Marcraft is preparing to offer made-to-measure Trump suits, for less than \$1,400 with delivery in a week, when it moves into its new office in Trump Tower next year. In February, Macy's will add golf shirts and other casual separates to the Trump mix.

The prospect of designers gnashing their teeth as Mr. Trump collects one of their industry awards seems remote, for now. In the meantime more and more young designers are entering the business - Vogue mentioned a handful this month - without a clear idea of how they will fit in.

"They're topstitching their labels as the next group arrives," Mr. Doonan said.

Mr. Wolfe says that all brands will face the problem of increasing retail consolidation. The other day he was at Garden State Plaza, the mall in Paramus, N.J., meeting with 35 financial analysts. "All they wanted to see were the publicly traded stores - Ann Taylor, American Eagle," he said. "Trends are now being bottom-lined. If it doesn't make money for investors, then it's not a trend."

What's a 21st-century designer to do?

Mr. Wolfe laughed.

"Date Nicole Kidman, obviously."

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