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## **Where is Mr. Wagner?**

Some years ago there was a small, family-owned men's clothing store in a tiny town in Kansas. Its owner, Mr. Wagner, was an old-fashioned haberdasher who took the greatest pleasure in outfitting his customers from head to toe. His sense of style was exceeded only by his idea of service, to the extent that his clients could truly leave their entire wardrobe, existing and future, in his capable hands if they chose to.

Somehow Mr. Wagner always knew when the time was right to replace a pair of shoes or if a new suit or sport coat was needed. He could sense if sprucing-up could be accomplished simply by adding a new tie or two. He could be counted on to remember everything already hanging in a closet so that augmentation was never redundant and always flattering, fitting and appropriate. Naturally, some customers enjoyed visiting the store, making their own selections and benefiting from Mr. Wagner's personal attention. But many others loved having the whole clothing process taken off their to-do list, sometimes forever. They just let Mr. Wagner do it, secure in the knowledge that they'd always look their sartorial best without lifting a finger or extending a thought to the process.

It would be easy to lament today's lack of personal service – no more Mr. Wagners. But, perhaps counter intuitively, there is just such service available today in the ubiquitous and seemingly unlikely place: the Internet.

Everyone is aware of Internet shopping these days, and it seems that almost everyone participates. More than a third of respondents surveyed by trade group Shop.org indicated they had made an internet purchase in the past year and well over half of those falling into the "highly affluent" group had done so.

What's even more interesting, though, is that Internet purchases are ever more likely to including purchases of clothing, shoes and accessories. Once seen as risky web purchases – because of the vagaries of fit, color and materials – clothing is now becoming easy to purchase online. The change is largely due to faster connection speeds, allowing more detailed visual information about items under consideration to reach shoppers within acceptable wait times, and the creativity and willingness of merchants who provide for an easy-to-try environment (fast shipping, quick ordering processes, and easy and free returns).

Though online purchases of clothing still comprise less than 10% of total clothing purchases, according to a recent *New York Times* article, here's a staggering fact: That small percentage accounted for more than \$18 *billion* in sales in 2006 and it surpassed total online spending on PCs, printers and word processing software!

Still, the essence of Mr. Wagner seems missing. The consumer must still define his clothing needs, narrow the now even more daunting field of choices (of both goods and providers), and make his purchases. Even though these arduous activities can now be completed at home, in the middle of the night, and in pajamas, they still have to be initiated by the gentleman desirous of being dressed *at the expense of anything else he'd rather be doing*. Better, but far from perfect.

Enter the shopping subscription service, designed to lift the burden of this one last inconvenient set of clothing decisions. The program, offered by OutfitEZ.com, is so reminiscent of Mr. Wagner's super-personal service that it's almost scary. The only real decision the customer makes is that he wants to be freed from thinking about his clothes. After that, a simple series of communications, accomplished by filling out familiar Internet-style forms, and a commitment to the budget level of the customer's choice complete the deal. It's the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Once the folks at OutfitEZ understand the "persona" of the customer, based on his selection of a specific lifestyle profile, and have a complete list of sizes, fit preferences and so on, they take over the Wagnerian role. Once each calendar quarter they put their savvy style and shopping skills to work and deliver the goods that will, in time, result in a complete, well-fitting and coordinated wardrobe. It's perfect. It will be refreshed as needed. Returns or exchanges, as needed for whatever reason, are easy. All the other benefits of the wired world apply (speed, ease of profile changing, ultra-secure financial transactions). And the personal attention for which Mr. Wagner's customers were so grateful is real, if reconfigured. Getting dressed is made easy once again.

Mr. Wagner has long since retired, but his spirit lives – on the Internet!

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