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This style haven wears success well

Written by Douglas P. Clement

Life, by nature, is aspirational. Everyone hopes to improve their status—a better job, nicer car, bigger house, longer vacations. Another thing that makes the list of hoped-for upgrades has a duality, and one side of that equation, incredibly, is not always given the importance it deserves.

The item is clothing, your wardrobe, and while success in a career can provide the means to acquire more stylish and expensive labels, the inverse of that scenario is as vital as it is undervalued.

The bottom line is this: Using discretionary funds, or stretching a budget, to buy high-quality, fashion-forward clothes is one of the best things you can do for yourself. Quality breeds quality, and a perfectly tailored suit, or form-flattering dress, combined with the right finishing touches can change everything.

In addition to amplifying the attributes of confidence, stature and pride, there's another important element and the salutary ripples that it will create. "Everyone will notice," said Andrew Mitchell-Namdar, Vice President, Marketing & Creative Services, for the Mitchells Family of Stores.

Mitchells on the Post Road in Westport, whose portfolio has grown

over the years to include Richards in Greenwich, Marshs on Long Island and Wilkes Bashford in San Francisco, has been Fairfield County's choice for discriminating residents since 1958. The website, www.mitchellsonline.com, recounts the beginnings and ethos of the family business:

"Our parents/grandparents, Ed and Norma Mitchell founded the company in 1958 with three men's suits, a coffee pot and a dream...

The heart of their extraordinary vision was to "hug" the customer... to enhance and add value to the retail experience by offering unsurpassed service, a uniquely warm environment, to give back to their communities and to build trusting relationships with customers and friends that would last throughout generations."

The original Ed Mitchells was 800 square feet, and today, guided by second and third generations of family members, Mitchells is 25,000 square feet and growing. The store already had the country's only full-line Hermès boutique within a store, along with Michael Kors, Brunello Cucinelli, Gucci and Prada mini-boutiques for women, and in August work was wrapping up on a new Hugo Boss branded boutique for men.

In the spirit of treating customers like members of the well dressed, highly successful family, Mitchells offers its guests

coffee, lattes, pastries and more, while also having a dedicated "Kiddie Corner" where children can relax as their parents shop.

"Shopping should be fun," declared Mitchell-Namdar, whose sartorial take one recent Friday was a taupe colored, custom-fitted suit with funky suede loafers by John Varvatos, a purple plaid pocket square, chunky watch and other accessories. Like the rest of the Mitchells and, not coincidentally, the sales associates, he was an embodiment of the store's ethos: superb style, quality over quantity, approachability, experience, expertise and the discretion to guide customers toward the right choices, no matter the price point.

Underpinning the details of the business model is the warmth of the family touch. Immediately after I announced my arrival at the desk, the infectiously friendly Bill Mitchell—one of the founders' two sons—had me looking at vintage photos and pondering what refreshments I might prefer. Another interview subject and some other business might have played the Paul Newman card—and Bill Mitchell has plenty of affecting anecdotes about his dear friend—but instead the message was all about family, community and inclusion.

With other Mitchells at the helm,

the Westport experience is replicated at 27,000-square-foot Richards of Greenwich, the winner of numerous retail space design awards, Marshs of Huntington, Long Island, and, since its acquisition by the Mitchell family in December of 2009, the Wilkes Bashford stores of San Francisco and Palo Alto. Wilkes Bashford, founded in 1966 by the retail icon of the same name, is the Bay Area's most renowned luxury retailer.

The Mitchells themselves are forces of nature, but they are quick to extend credit for the family business' success to their staff. Andrew Mitchell-Namdar proudly noted that, on average, staff members with the stores had been on board for more than 15 years. That loyalty breeds "uncommon knowledge," which translates into an ability to save customers time and money by connecting them with the right pieces.

For women, some of those items will surely come from what Mitchell-Namdar calls one of Mitchell's secrets, The Green Room, an expansive section of the women's department with items that sacrifice nothing in style or quality but check in at a lower price range. Think of Theory suits, tailored, flattering and ultimately affordable.

Another best kept secret, as in one that deserves to get out, is that Mitchells has grown to become the largest jeweler



Beaded bracelets by Sydney Evan are in. in northeastern Fairfield County, carrying a broad and beautiful range of designers in both the categories of designer fashion jewelry and fine jewelry.

All the lines are exquisite, but two of the more intriguing ones pointed out by Mitchell-Namdar were Diamond in the Rough, whose rough diamonds star in a range of imaginative designs, and Kimberly McDonald's jewelry featuring geodes cut in half. McDonald's pieces were worn by Sarah Jessica Parker in



Manolo Blahnik boots with fur trim.

"Sex and the City 2." A signature item to look for in the jewelry/gifts arena are the singular frames by Monica Rich Kosann of New Canaan.

Throughout the store, another of Mitchells hallmarks is the constant arrival of new vendors and lines. For example, there's a new Max Mara line for women for the fall, and the timeless glamour of the Loren Jewels women's line is new to Mitchells this fall.

In term of trends, Mitchell-Namdar articulated appealing lists for men and



Bill Mitchell, Andrew Mitchell-Namdar and Russ Mitchell in the Westport store.

women. In men's fashions, the trend is toward more tapered suits, flat front pants, and coats that are a little shorter. The result are pieces that aren't tight but very flattering for the body, especially for huskier men.

The new fit has also moved into sportswear, where the washed vintage look will be big in shirts and sweaters, along with washed denim. The desert boot is back for men, in suede and leather, and at levels ranging from Cole Haan to Gucci.

Through it all, one must-have for men is a classic Hermès tie that goes with any suit.

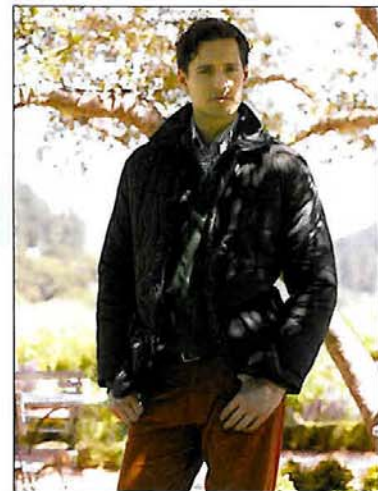
Women can look forward to a lot of fur

trim, including on Manolo Blahnik boots, lots of bracelets and beaded bracelets, and ruffles on scarves and gloves, along with other trim flourishes.

In the spirit of flourishes, Mitchells embellishes its hug-the-customer and shopping-should-be fun philosophies with what Mitchell-Namdar called in-store theater, where things are constantly happening. Some of those upcoming things include a pair of jewelry trunk shows, Temple St. Clair Sept. 24 and Caroline Ellen, with a personal appearance, Sept. 25, along with a trunk show Oct. 1 and 2 of Donna Degnan's sophisticated designs that give primacy to fabric and bespeak impeccable workmanship.

At the end of the day, leaving Mitchells with the right aspirational clothing to make life brighter and better is "about feeling comfortable in fashion," Mitchell-Namdar said. It's not about buying the trendiest or most expensive items but making the right choices.

And making the right choices is something three generations of Mitchells have been doing since the 1950s, when, at age 55, Jack Mitchell decided he didn't like commuting into Manhattan for his job anymore and put his house in Westport on the market. When a woman who came to look at it asked where she could get good men's clothes, he had the proverbial



Men's outerwear will have a shorter profile.

lightbulb moment and the rest is history.

When asked, Bill Mitchell said the family no longer has that original coffeepot that help percolate one of Fairfield County's most successful family businesses, but they do have the very first sales receipt. It was for a suit that cost \$59.

Mitchells is located at 670 Post Road East in Westport; the phone number is 203-227-5165. For more information on the Mitchells Family of Stores, see the website at www.mitchellsonline.com. 