

SOMETHING *in the* WAY YOU MOVE



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“SUCCESS SEEMS TO BE CONNECTED WITH ACTION,” Conrad Hilton once observed. Successful people keep moving.” Almost certainly Hilton meant that businesses needed to be dynamic, to adapt to change, rather than physically move. But success often pulls us in ways we hadn’t expected.

If you’ve stopped by Phillips Men’s Wear in the past few months, you’ve noticed a different Phillips, the result of actions we took to renovate our existing space.

But it wasn’t a simple remodel, it was a redirection from the way it’s always been done to a new vision for the way it’s supposed to be. We’re getting a jump on the future.

In the past, we combined our instincts about fabric, fit, and styling features with data gleaned from what we’d sold the season before to guide us as we decided what inventory to buy for the next season. Growth necessarily meant more inventory. And with each season’s buy, we hoped that the choices we made were the same choices our clients would make—that the things we liked, and thought we could sell, were the same things you’d like, and buy.

That traditional business model had always worked well, but we began to notice a divergence in our growth. Our sales volume continued to increase, but proportionally, our special-order business was increasing even more rapidly. Special orders once accounted for less than 25 percent of our sales volume. It’s now over 60 percent and growing. Our clients are exercising more choices, adding their style and fit preferences.

The dramatic style changes of the past few years have produced dramatic diversity in what people want. Styles change. That’s the nature of the menswear business. But we’ve also seen a radical change in our competition.

Here, There, and Everywhere

Not so long ago, our competition was other stores. Some of those were located in the enormous malls built in the ‘70s, places that aggregated dozens of stores in one place, always with large department stores as anchors. Today, those stores are gone altogether, rapidly slipping into irrelevance, or struggling to find new channels of distribution. Malls themselves are becoming ghostly shells and the development companies that own them are scrambling to repurpose the cavernous spaces.

Some competitors were locally-owned, downtown merchants. Independents, like Phillips. They’re gone too, remembered only by long-term residents. “Oh yeah, I remember Peter Daniel. Used to be where the Egg Harbor building is now, right?” No, that was Chuck Hines. But yes, both are gone, Peter Daniel in 2012, and Chuck Hines in 2006.

Our new competition was a different business model altogether.

Come Together

As marketing has become more sophisticated and logistics more efficient, some lines we’ve featured began reaching out directly to our customers. They became both our supplier and competitor. On the other hand, the proliferation of online resources had created a buy-anything-at-anytime virtual marketplace. That model seemed like an efficient method of acquiring products, initially at least. However, for many people it became a time-consuming task, often with unsatisfactory results, for anything but commodity items. The nuances of fit and the subtleties of fabric were impossible to experience online. And in subjective areas like menswear, the need for clarity and expertise seemed to increase in direct proportion to the internet’s inability to provide it.

We recognized that clarity and expertise are what we’ve always provided. Menswear was simply the medium. The goal of our fall 2017 remodel was a setting in which we could dialogue with our customers about what they wanted. We wanted to create a more comfortable, collaborative environment instead of a traditional “sell ‘em what you got” retail space. The result was the concept of Phillips as a design studio.

To collaborate is literally to co-labor, to work with. Our focus became working with clients to create individualized wardrobe options for all aspects of their lives—professional, personal, and social. We didn’t want to be a better store; we wanted to provide a better experience.

Our remodel was a step in the right direction. An equally important step was finding additional resources that allowed us to expand what we could do with clients. What tools could they give us, so we could turn our clients’ ideas into realities? Now we’re as concerned with how a company is taking advantage of emerging technologies and responding to changing trends as we are how good the line looks.

Revolution

We’ve always had the ability to create full custom garments—shirts, trousers, sport coats, suits, formal wear, even outerwear. And those custom options still provide the greatest opportunities for specific style features and fit. But delivery time and price are sometimes objections.

We found a new line that revolutionized made-to-measure shirts with their proprietary Datafit technology. They delivered made-to-measure shirts in 7-10 working days with prices starting at \$98. That meant we could take a fresh look at our own business model.



Terry Owens and Peter Yankala, owner, survey the space where the Phillips Men’s Wear Studio will be located.



Terry Owens (on left) and owner Peter Yankala are building out new studio space to adapt to their changing business model.

We found a Canadian pant company that had developed a washable, wool-blend fabric, and used it in their new 5-pocket model. A dress jean! It was exactly the kind of innovative approach we're looking for in our business partners going forward. And it was only a small part of the spectrum of fabrics, fits, and features that they offered. Their rapid-ship inventory became our in-stock inventory.

Those are just two of the resources we've found that allowed us to offer more to clients—more fabric choices, more models, better fits—and simultaneously reduce our upfront commitment to inventory. We'll never abandon off-the-shelf merchandise altogether, but the acceptance of our new direction certainly confirmed our beliefs about how we needed to position ourselves for the future.

Tell Me Why

By any measure, the actions we initiated last fall have been successful. Sales? Up. Feedback of long-term clients? Positive. Acceptance by new clients? Very positive.

When we began our changes last fall, relocating was not even a consideration. But the success of those changes allowed us to think differently, demanded it really.

We agreed we'd move only if a different location met two conditions. First, we had to stay in downtown Barrington, Phillips's home for over 70 years and the hub of the community. Downtown is both a connection to the past and portal to the future. Second, new space would have to be a better environment for our studio concept.

Some solutions emerge only after a long process of deliberation. Others are so quick that you initially regard them with doubt. "It can't be this easy," we thought as we stood at our south windows looking out onto Station Street. Across the street were For Lease signs on two separate, but adjoining storefronts.

Well, that would certainly satisfy our downtown requirement. But what

about the "wow" factor? Would one or both of the spaces be the studio setting we needed?

Good Day Sunshine

Through the tall, street-level windows that flooded the spaces with natural light, we could see 13-foot ceilings and opportunity. It was a dramatic setting with even greater potential. We could connect the two spaces, expose the brick walls, and install hardwood floors. We could create the studio space we wanted for our clients.

With the success of our studio-design approach and the perfectly timed availability of space, we recognized an alignment of the sun, the moon, and the stars that we felt would never again be replicated. So, we're moving... exactly 70 feet from our current location on Station Street to our new location on Station Street. Many of the lines we currently carry will be going with us, as long as they are also moving with the times. We won't be the gimmicky store with no inventory.

Success may be connected with action, but action alone doesn't ensure success. It has to be the right action at the right time, a perfect description of our move. 

Terry Owens is the co-proprietor of Phillips Men's Wear and has been with the business since 1991. He is the author of two books, "Extreme Marriage" and "Super Bowl Marriage" and has regularly contributed feature articles to Quintessential Barrington.

