Men's clothier designs for those small in stature, big on style

By Jean Patteson

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(MCT)

ORLANDO, Fla. - Shortly after she was married, Consuelo Bova did what many new wives do: She decided to revamp her husband's wardrobe.

Not that Jeffrey Bova (BSBA '95) was an awful dresser, she hastily explains. Just a little conservative. She thought a more "hip, modern" look would enhance his image as a successful young professional.

She had no idea how frustrating her quest for small-size menswear would be. Nor that it would spark a new business for her and her husband.

She began her search for stylish new duds at a major mall near their home in Lutz, Fla., just north of Tampa. It didn't take her long to discover what about half the men in the U.S. already know: It's not easy to find hip, modern clothes that fit properly if you're short.

"My husband is a trim 5-foot-7," says Consuelo, 28. "Every time I asked for something in a 32-inch waist with a 28-inch inseam, the store people looked at me as if I was nuts.

"They'd tell me, 'Absolutely not.' Or they'd give me a larger size and say, 'Just take it to a tailor.'"

But why, she wondered, should short men have to spend time and money having their clothes tailored, when taller men can simply buy off the rack? Especially when tailoring doesn't always produce a perfect fit.

Hemming a regular pair of pants shortens the length, she says, but it doesn't adjust the rise or pocket placement, so the proportions are all wrong.

As far as she could tell, short men were left with three options: buying custom apparel (expensive), shopping in boys' departments (humiliating), or making do with ill-fitting clothes (dorky).

After her foray into the mall, "I left very frustrated many hours later," says Consuelo.

But soon afterward, the couple turned that frustration into a new enterprise. In May 2005 - just 18 months after their wedding - they launched ForTheFit.com, an online menswear store that specializes in clothing for men 5 feet 9 inches tall and shorter.

It is not the only source offering small-size menswear from a variety of designers, but it does have a unique focus: affordable, brand-name clothing for younger, style-conscious men shorter than 5-feet-9.
The Bovas were working for Capital One Financial in Tampa when they met. They knew nothing about the men's fashion industry.

Jeff was a graduate of the University of Florida and Penn State with degrees in business administration.

Consuelo had a degree in international business and marketing from Georgetown University and was studying for a law degree at Stetson University in St. Petersburg.

"But we always knew we wanted to start a business together," she says.

Their research into the menswear market soon convinced them of the need for fashionable, better-quality clothing in small sizes.

There was plenty of big and tall menswear, says Jeff Bova, 33. But most department and specialty stores offer little for short men - even though, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, almost 50 percent of American males are shorter than 5 feet, 8-1/2 inches, and 20 percent are shorter than 5-feet-6.

That discrepancy is not new, says Robert Stern, a leading expert on men's small-size apparel.

"The problem is that the clothing needs for shorter men is not as `compelling' as for big or tall men," explains Stern, who founded Short Sizes Inc. in Cleveland, Ohio, 35 years ago to do what the Bovas do today: supply small-size clothing and accessories to short men.

A shorter man can have a garment cut down or try a boy's size," he says. However, "a garment is never the same after it has been drastically altered, as the proportions are out of kilter."

Though clothing designed for shorter men is available, "It mostly targets an older demographic," says Jeff Bova. "Purple blazers and things like that have no appeal for affluent young professionals."

On their first visit to the menswear fashion market in Dallas, the couple discovered a few apparel companies that make ready-to-wear small sizes, and others that custom-tailor clothing in short, extra-short and portly-short sizes.

"So we took the plunge," says Consuelo. A plunge that rapidly gobbled up their savings and several loans.

After settling on the ForTheFit name - "We wanted to emphasize fit, not size," says Consuelo - they designed a Web site, ordered merchandise and gave up the second floor of their home to their new business.

But with the birth of their first child Dec. 9, "We'll probably have to move into a real office pretty soon," says Consuelo.

So far, the Bovas have attracted "close to 500" customers, including some in Canada and the United Kingdom. A number have posted grateful messages on their Web site, including "Danny" from Laguna Beach, Calif., who writes:
"As a 5'4" male, pants that are fit and contoured to my stature have been a tough item to find. For the first time in 20 years, I am wearing blue jeans which fit and, more importantly, look great on me!"

Their business "hasn't made us rich yet," says Consuelo, but it is growing steadily. Casual clothing is proving most popular, especially khaki pants, polo shirts and premium denim jeans from companies such as Diesel and Silver.

Prices are medium to high. Most jeans are in the $89 to $180 range, chinos run about $65 and dress pants from $100 to $190. The company also offers a shop-by-size feature, a fit and style guide, and a made-to-measure suit service.

Recently, at the urging of a tall, thin relative, the Bovas added a long-and-lean category.

"Eventually," says Consuelo, "we want to be there for every man who doesn't fit the bell curve, not just short men."