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How to Talk to Your TAILOR

When you get fitted for a suit, do you feel as though you're in a foreign country? It helps to speak the language.

By **SCOTT OMELIANUK**

Way back in high school, somewhere between the demise of the leisure suit and the rise of that broad-shouldered blazer comedians wore with sleeves pushed up, I worked afternoons in the tailoring department of a clothing store, where I was an assistant to a bunch of needle-and-thread men from Italy.

They scissored, I swept. They stitched, I slipped suits into garment bags. They had accents, my *tre ragazzi*, but they spoke English well, until, that is, a difficult customer showed up—someone who didn't understand his own body or the limitations of a yard and a half of fabric or, most of all, the tailor's art. Then it was, "Còmo? Huh? No capir," and a whole lot of shragging with upturned hands.

No doubt the customers would have been better off if they spoke the tailor's language. I'm not saying they needed to enroll at a *Parlo Italiano* immersion school. But it helps to know what to ask for and how to ask for it in a way that results, come time to try on the finished product, in your being happy and your tailor being proud of his work and there never, ever being—right there in front of the three-way mirror—any free alterations.

That's the key: a conversation. A back-and-forth that accommodates both your desires and what he knows to be possible. "The ideal customer would say he'd like the jacket to fit perfectly," says Michael Pellettieri, head tailor at Louis Boston. "That the cuffs should show a little beneath the jacket sleeve; the trousers should be long, without a break; the waist should be a little loose."

At the very least the ideal customer should offer a tailor a rough description of how he likes to wear a suit. So don't be timid. His mouth is full of pins—he can't bite.

Alterations 101: An Introduction to Tailoring

Let's start with vocabulary: everything from the cuffs on your trousers to the collar on your suit jacket—the collar being that part that's backed with felt and stops right at those notches of your lapels, called the gorge. The lapels would be those two pieces of fabric on each side of your jacket that meet at about its top button. When that button's high, you have a high stance; when it's low, you have a low button-stance (which tends to look better on beefier men). There's really no standard dictionary for this stuff, at least anymore, but you might want to check out the brief glossary at the top of pages 90 and 91 to see other terms you'll likely hear when you step into new trousers and mount the block for a fitting.

The next point seems obvious, but many men, having exhausted themselves shragging on jackets, simply can't imagine taking their shoes off. So they forgo the store's tailoring service altogether. Don't do that. Some alterations may be free—the cuffing of trousers, the taking-up of sleeves. And some may cost—the slimming of a jacket, the resetting of a collar. But unless you have a personal tailor back home whom you've trusted for years, make use of the store's service. All of it, even the cost part. These men behind the curtain, they're not just guys who know how to sew. They're a part of the team—from designer to wearer—that's crucial to your looking good in the good-looking suit for which you just paid a fistful of dollars.

When you do go for alterations, wear a dress shirt and the appropriate shoes—the ones you'll wear with whatever you're buying. That'll help with the fitting. If you don't have them with you, ask the salesman if he's got a house shirt or shoes to try on with the suit. Good stores usually do. And one last thing: Be honest with your tailor (and yourself). There should be none of this: "Yes, it's a little snug in the waist, but I'm planning to go back to the gym and lose five pounds, so you don't need to worry about letting it out." At all.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY YUKO SHIMIZU

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Basic Tailor-Speak

COMMIT THESE TERMS TO MEMORY, THEN MATTER-OF-FACTLY DROP THEM INTO YOUR CONVERSATION THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE IN FOR A FITTING. YOUR TAILOR WILL BE SUITABLY IMPRESSED.

BESOM POCKET: AN INSET POCKET SEWN INSIDE THE SLUIT THAT HAS A RIDGED OR WELLED SLIT OPENING. THE ALTERNATIVE: A PATCH POCKET.

RISSENG BUTTONS: BUTTONS ON A JACKET'S CUFF THAT TOUCH—A CLASSY DETAIL MADE EVEN CLASSIER BY OPEN, WORKING BUTTONHOLES.

BUTTON-STANCE: WHERE THE TOP BUTTON FIRST BUTTONS ON THE CHEST. THE STANCE IS STAGGARD, HIGH OR LOW. THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN-CUT, TWO-BUTTON SUIT HAS BEEN LOWERING ITS STANCE SO THE LAPELS FORM A DEEP V.

FULL CANVAS: AN INTERLINING THAT IS STITCHED TO THE SEAMS OF THE ENTIRE FRONT OF THE JACKET, ALLOWING THE WOOL TO REVERT TO ITS NATURAL, SUPPLE STATE.

Lesson One: The Trousers

Milton Berle co-wrote a song parody back in the day called "Sam, You've Made the Pants Too Long." Uncle Miltie gave Sam the Tailor a bad rap. It wasn't necessarily Sam's fault the pants turned out that way. Let me explain.

A proper trouser fit begins with wearing the pants at your waist. Not where you'd wear your jeans. Or where your belly gets in the way of your belt buckle. But on the hips, an inch or so below the navel.

Unless they're of a pretty fashion-forward cut, that's where you should wear your pants. There are a couple of reasons for this. Unless the rise of the trousers (that's the distance between the waistband and where the legs meet to form the crotch) deviates from standard, wearing the trousers below your true waist means they'll hang on you the way Charlie Chaplin's did on him. And if those pants have pleats, it's even worse. The pleats, when not allowed to fall straight from high on the waist, will puff out rather than lay flat. The result: You'll look like something's going on under there. Not good in a board meeting.

If you don't wear 'em waist high, it's time for a conversation. "I know I should wear the trousers here," tell the tailor, "but it's my habit to wear them lower." Then he can warn you about the pleats and the rise, pin up the legs at a spot that doesn't allow them to drag on the ground, and take in or let out the waist to accommodate the part of you where the waist will actually ride.

If all this seems unnecessary, listen to Bessie Callis, master tailor at Marie's in Portland, Ore. "When it comes to fitting the pants, I tell them to move around a little bit, so they know for sure just where they want the waist to be," she says. "With young men, I say, 'These are not your jeans—the waist needs to be a bit higher.'"

Whether you move around a lot or not, a good waistband fit can be had by making sure you can slip two fingers between your waistband and you. It's a trick Bessie uses, though she acknowledges some men like it a little snugger, some a little looser. She'll take it in or let it out. But here's something to keep in mind: There's only so much fabric to be let out of a pair of pants—whether we're talking the waistband or the seat of the pants, which, if your hind is rather large, can often require more letting out than a waistband. On the other hand, pants can only be taken in a couple of inches and no more before the back pockets start to meet in the middle. If that happens, you need a new size, not a new tailor.

Back to the legs: Ask the tailor to pin up each leg separately. None of us are perfect, and that's especially true in build. One leg is normally a little longer than the other, and taking up each trouser leg the same amount means one will be too short or too long. Most guys like the trousers to fall to the second or third lace on the shoe. That makes a nice break in the crease. Feel free to let the tailor know if you'd like it another way. When it comes to cuffs, you want an inch and a half to two inches, depending upon your height. Flat-front trousers don't need cuffs. In fact, they're likely to look pretty funny with them.

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Finally, it's time to talk about any special needs you might have with regard to your lower half. Me, I've got some serious girls around my legs from once having been an avid cyclist. Or maybe from not having gotten back to the gym to lose those five extra pounds. Either way, my pistons are such that they put some good rub on the fabric between them and usually wear out the crotch of a pair of trousers long before the rest of the garment is ready to give up the ghost. But my tailor worked out a solution: He uses the fabric left over from hemming the trousers to create a little diamond of fabric that he sews into the crotch as a sort of reinforcement. When it wears through, it comes off and there's a fine new layer of material underneath. All I needed to do was point out the problem.

Lesson Two: The Coat

In that old "Sam" ditty, Miltie sings, "You made the coat and vest fit the best." Today very few suits come with vests, which is a good thing, because you need to be a skilled tailor indeed to fit a vest properly. I learned this when a master tailor spent a good half-hour pinning and unpinning a waistcoat trying to get it to sit just right on my curious frame, which includes a "dropped" shoulder, meaning my right shoulder hangs an inch or so lower than the left, and a "pigeon" chest. (None of this is as disfiguring or uncommon as you might think, which you know if you've ever been properly measured for a suit.) Though a suit jacket is much more complicated than a vest—the jacket has yards and yards of stitching and canvas linings and darts and strategic padding—it's just those complications that allow a craftsman to push and pull and tack down the suit's fabric in a way that suits you.

The start of any coat alteration comes with your standing up straight and the tailor seating the coat properly, so its collar rides flat around the base of your neck. That way, the whole coat will hang nicely off your shoulders, fall to its proper length and allow its front buttons to meet with their holes on the proper plane.

It also allows the sleeves to drape, so the tailor can assess the need to alter them. Some stores, caring only about fast turnover, will grab the sleeve, pin it up (or mark it for letting out) so its cuff will rest at about the base of your thumb. Should you like them longer or shorter—so show more shirt cuff, say—now's the time to let it be known. But even before that, do a quick self-evaluation. Do you have a dropped shoulder, as I do? Point it out, because you might need a little padding to even it up with your normal shoulder. A piece may be slipped in under the jacket but on top of your shoulder for leeting. In that case, you might find that the sleeve needs be altered differently than it did before.

Here's something else you might consider: If I'll cost, but it's kinda cool. One hallmark of a custom-made suit is working cuff buttons. It's sort of like a membership badge. You don't need to spend five grand and wait three months for that, though. Some takers I've known ask their takers to split the seam on the sleeve, cut in buttonholes and stitch their edges, so that the buttons that were sewn on as pure decoration now work and no one's the wiser about the suit's being off the rack. Our secret.

But all of that is getting ahead of the game. You really want the body of the suit

FUSED: A JACKET WITH AN INTERLINING THAT HAS LITERALLY BEEN HEAT GLUED, LIKE AN IRON-ON PATCH, TO THE REVERSE SIDE OF AN OUTER FABRIC. FUSING ADDS STRUCTURE BUT ALSO MAKES THE FABRIC THICKER AND STIFFER.

GORGE: THE POINT ON A JACKET WHERE THE LAPELS START AND THE COLLAR ENDS. A VERY LOW GORGE DROPS DOWN TO THE MIDDLE OF THE CHEST.

INTERLINING: A LOOSELY WOVEN WOOL OR COTTON FABRIC USED BETWEEN THE OUTER FABRIC AND THE LINING TO PROVIDE STRUCTURE AND WARMTH.

THE RISE: THE DISTANCE FROM CROTCH TO WAISTBAND. IF YOU'RE TALL, ASK FOR A HIGH RISE. IF YOU'RE SHORT, GO FOR A LOW ONE.

VENT: A VERTICAL SLIT IN THE JACKET, FROM THE HEM UPWARD, PERMITTING EASE OF MOVEMENT AND POCKET ACCESS. A CENTER VENT IS CLASSIC AMERICAN. SIDE VENTS ARE ENGLISH, USED ON A DOUBLE-BREASTED. UNVENTED JACKETS ARE CONTINENTAL AND WORK BEST WITH FLAT BEHINDS.

One hallmark of a custom-made suit is working cuff buttons. It's sort of like a membership badge. Some rakes I've known ask their tailors to split the seam on the sleeve, cut in buttonholes and stitch their edges.

coat to be properly fitted to your trunk before any sleeve fitting. A size 42 is just an approximation. One man might be a 42 because of the coat's broad shoulders; another might find the 42 too big at the shoulders but just right for the saddles around his belly. Which means you and your tailor need to check for the following:

Make sure the collar wraps close to your neck. If not, it'll have to be reworked—an extra cost, but essential to a proper fit. If you see a roll across the back of the shoulders but your tailor doesn't bring it to his attention, because it means the coat might need some letting out across the top of the back. A folded drape from the shoulders—in either the front or back of the suit just to the inside of your armpits—likely means you need some taking-in under the armholes along the side seams.

If the fabric that falls down your chest lifts up off your chest when the suit is buttoned, you're in a bit of a spot. That means there isn't enough fabric in the suit's chest pieces to accommodate your pecs. Not a lot to be done about that (you can't create fabric where there is none) other than going up a size—which will likely mean shoulders that are too broad and trousers that, if you're in good shape, are far too big. Instead, try various approaches to buttoning the jacket. On a three-button suit, for example, see if that lift is minimized when the top button is fastened. Or perhaps it'll be buttoning at the middle that reduces the pucker. You might even ask the tailor if pressing the lapels so they come together at the second button rather than the first will help. If none of that works, try a different model suit. Maybe a two-button.

If you're in good shape, it's likely you'll want your coat to show off that gym time. Which means giving it a tapered waist. There are a couple of ways to achieve that, the easiest being to take in the coat's side seams—more at the bottom of the coat, less as the seams rise toward its armholes. A better way would be to have your tailor open every seam—the sides, the one that runs down the center of your back, any front seams, even the front darts that run from under your rib cage to about your waist—and stitch them a little closer together. This operation costs, and is very time-consuming, but you'll end up with the best-fitting suit coat you can have that's not made expressly for you.

Don't forget to make sure the front buttons close without pulling. If you don't require any major

league alterations, but still find the coat a wee bit snug or a hair loose, a little removal and replacement of the buttons will take care of that.

A few other notes: If a coat seems too long, try another model. You really can't take up its hem without a large cost and the larger problem of the coat's being out of balance—its buttons sitting too low, its pockets too close to the hem. Some men find that single-breasted suits fit them best. Others look better in double-breasted. Stick with the silhouette that does you proud. No sense in following the current fashion if it doesn't leave you as sharp-looking as you know you are.

And the same goes for vents. All the tailoring in the world isn't going to help a big-bottomed man look better in a ventless suit that floats out over his backside. Give a side-vented coat a try, in that case. Or go middle-of-the-road with a center vent—a safe alternative for any guy.

After all that, it's time to say, Thank you very much, sir. Shake the tailor's hand. Let him know that you know he's an artist—which, given that he's apprenticed since the age of 13, he is.

The Final Exam

The acid test of how well you communicated with your tailor comes a while after that first fitting. Be patient. Things take time and other people are in line before you. You can't expect a two-piece bought today to be altered tomorrow. Expect more like two weeks, though even that may be optimistic. But look at it this way: Excepting, say, a date tonight with Charlize Theron, we all know the good stuff is worth waiting for.

And the good stuff is worth trying on in the store while the tailor's still there.

Slip into the trousers. Pull on the jacket. Mount the block and check yourself out in the mirror. Not only will you immediately see if there

are any corrections to be made, it'll show the tailor that you're not just putting down money and picking up a commodity, but that you're taking the time to appreciate his work. Now, if something doesn't look quite right to you, indicate it. The guarantee might not be in writing, but a fine specialty store and a good tailor will stand by their work and do the necessary fine tuning. That might even happen while you wait. At which point the suit is likely to be A-1.

Someone once said that if a tailor rips and tucks your suit so that it fits you perfectly, that tailor has failed, the point being that no man is perfect. And so his job is to create an illusion that improves upon nature. But let's face it, even the best tailors aren't miracle workers. They can't turn an apple-shaped man into an Atlas. That's between you and the gym, and you have to be realistic. That digression aside, if the suit is, in fact, A-1, and if the store allows such things, a tip for the master is never a bad idea. That cash exchange shouldn't feel patronizing at all; it's just one more way of communicating with your man and conveying appreciation for his skill in making you look your best. ■

