



[Home](#) > [Lifestyle](#) > [Collecting](#)

Lifestyle Feature

Page 3 of 4 from [The Best Men's Suits](#)

[Neal Santelmann](#)

## Style Vs. Fashion

Once you get into stratospheric price levels, it makes sense to ask yourself whether you're making an investment or buying a fashion item. Both have their pluses and minuses. While an immaculately rendered and classically tailored suit may last ten or 20 years and never go out of style, it'll hardly get you noticed in a crowd. Meanwhile, slick fashion suits will have you looking like a rock star, but only for a couple of years.

"The choice between fashion and longevity is a very personal one," says **Michael Bastian**, men's fashion director at **Bergdorf Goodman** in New York, who notes that he has several fashion suits that he wears only once every five or six years. "The best strategy is to play with them."

Indeed, playfulness is one of the defining characteristics of the latest generation of suit buyers. "Suits are definitely back, but in a more personal way," says Bastian. "The younger guys are treating suits more as an integrated part of their wardrobe--pairing jackets or pants with less traditional elements for distinctly personal looks. If they wear a tie now it's because they want to, not because their suit needs one."

That same philosophy is gradually making its way into corporate culture. "When it comes to a wardrobe, there's no longer the same emphasis on distinguishing between going to work and socializing," says **Lauren Solomon**, a New York-based image consultant who spent four years as the in-house image specialist at Chase Manhattan and now teaches "The Brand Called Me," a mandatory mini-course at New York University's Stern School of Business. "Your business wardrobe shouldn't be just navy and gray suits anymore, and your social wardrobe shouldn't be just corduroys. Wherever you're going these days, you're doing business, and you need to feel good about what you're wearing at any given moment."

Still, a suit must be appropriate to a region or industry. "What works in financial services in major metropolitan areas is not going to fly out in the middle of nowhere," notes Solomon. For instance, the light blues, greens, taupes and beiges one can get away with in the entertainment industry might not work in financial services, where dark solids, pinstripes and subtle patterns still hold sway. Similarly, the brighter colors and more creative styles of the West Coast look awkward and silly in laid-back New England or the conservative Midwest.

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