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Managing to survive? Independent bespoke tailors in Britain, 1919-1939.

Fears voiced between the wars, that the menswear trade was undergoing a process of change that would eventually threaten the livelihoods of many independent bespoke tailors, were of course not new. Indeed, concern had been repeatedly expressed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the competition of – among others – ‘brass and glass’ shops, or of clothiers selling cheap ready-to-wear suits and other garments. However, by the 1920s such fears had intensified and gained a new sense of urgency. There may have been little agreement as to whether the greatest threat was posed by the wholesale bespoke or by the ready-to-wear trades, by the tally trade or by the impressive-looking branch shops of large multiple concerns, but it was acknowledged that mass-production, marketing and distribution systems and techniques were disastrously affecting the ‘small man’, especially in the last bastion of his bespoke trade: the suit.

The aim of this paper is to examine the management strategies adopted by bespoke tailors in order to counter this new competition, in the context of perceptions and fears about trade decline. The paper will focus particularly on bespoke tailors' retailing, rather than manufacturing practices, and will consider how advertising, display and salesmanship became fundamental to independent traders' survival strategies. These were not new themes: the need to advertise widely, to adopt attractive displays, and to provide expert salesmanship had long been recurrent themes in the trade literature. However, the paper will suggest that the ways in which these practices were conceptualised and put into effect in the inter-war period cannot be understood without reference to two key themes in contemporary commercial thinking, whose impact will be considered in turn.

First of all, it was widely assumed that by the 1920s certain forms of retailing had become anachronistic, and out of step with 'modern' times: in order to be successful, it was believed, businesses had to be 'up-to-date' and modern. However, independent bespoke tailoring increasingly came to be seen as invariably 'old-fashioned', whatever the actual practices of individual tailors. On the contrary, successful multiples such as Burtons or the Fifty Shilling Tailors were perceived to embody a new commercial modernity, while at the same time in reality adopting many of the successful management practices and techniques of independent tailors.

Secondly, the main characteristic of the inter-war commercial environment was generally perceived to be the conflict between the ‘small man’ and big business, which each side seeking to emphasise the advantage to the consumer of shopping with them: on the one side, personal attention and service, on the other, all the advantages in terms of cost and reliability of dealing with a large-scale organisation.

In conclusion, the paper will suggest that the management practices of independent bespoke tailors in the inter-war period cannot be understood without reference to such wider commercial ideas and debates. These provided a framework against which retailers made decisions about issues such as publicity, display and salesmanship, and thus sought to counter the fierce competition of other retailers selling similar garments.

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