

# Testing Conditions

Everyone knows the nation's in a financial pickle. None more so than those who trade for a living. Opening their doors every day, menswear retailers around the country could be forgiven for offering up fair weather incantations alongside prayers, holy and unholy, to the heavens. Just to catch a break.

And an Irish summer certainly doesn't make life any easier for anyone. Like it or not, we're all wrapped up in this forbidding economic inclemency, together. But that said, trawling from coast to midlands to coast, Menswear in Ireland found morale still afloat and survival instincts intact in a number of Irish independent retailers.

## Will Lee of Fitzgerald Menswear, Waterford

"We're meant to be the sunny South East," quips Will Lee, almost incredulous at the torrential downpours washing the country's high streets, and especially those on his own patch. "You look out in the morning, hoping it's clear. If it is, you know people will come to town. And once there, you've got a chance of holding on to them. Otherwise, you can kind of forget about it."

"As for the recession, well, it brings all sorts of challenges," he adds. "But some of them are good. They get you thinking outside the box. Coming up with new ideas and approaches to things like price points. And ways of relating to those who come into your shop."

Lee continues: "You've got to listen. In the boom times, perhaps there wasn't enough of that done. Budgets are much tighter now, though. And so the real push is to help your customer get the most for their money. You've also got to help them see beyond the price tag. To show them when they're getting quality."

"We reward those who put money in our till. It's the quid pro quo, in truth. It could be as simple as a voucher. So, they know their custom's been appreciated. And that we want to see them back some day, soon, when we can do something else for them," Lee explains, with the assurance of a man who's in this for the long haul.

## Brian Hogg of Connolly Menswear, Clonmel, Tipperary

"You just have to hold tough," says Brian Hogg, assistant manager at Connolly's, a store that's been a mainstay in Clonmel for over 30 years. "It's all about staying afloat. These tough times will turn around. They have to. In the meantime, we do what we do best: cater for our customers."

It's an upbeat and refreshingly defiant approach to the economic elements that have conspired to test every business. The weather is a fickle friend too. "There's always an influx of shoppers

when the sun comes out," Hogg says. "It's incredible. You could say it's almost like the good old days. Spirits soar. And people shop."

"But looking out on a rainy Irish summer's day," he continues "would bring you back to earth, reminding you how quickly things can change. You'll be doing well to sell a short-sleeved shirt when it's teeming out of the heavens. We live in hope though. The sun'll be back."

The real tester is meeting customers' budgets. And setting price points at a level that attracts people in a way that sales don't. "You could be in sale mode all year round, if you wanted," Hogg mentions. "But that's no good because then it's the norm, and the expectation will be that everything should be at a knockdown price."

Staying in business is now all about using

one's nous, Hogg believes. "We do our damndest to work for all wallet sizes," he stresses. "And being clever about the discounts you offer does that."

It's important to have clarity, though. "When you're offering value, the customer ought to be able to see it. Promotions and incentives have got to be clear," Hogg mentions. "You can't go around trying to mind read your customers," he adds with a chuckle, "you'd get brain damage doing that."

## Aidan Malone of Geraghty's, Galway City

"We have to keep going," says Aidan Malone of Geraghty's, a menswear store that can proudly trace its family business legacy all the way back to 1934. "There's no alternative. Well, there is but we won't look at it. In these times, you do what you

can, to the best of your ability. And you keep going."

"There's a saying," Malone recounts, "that everything happens in Galway. That's still the case but it hasn't stopped businesses from closing. But that's what's happening. It's tough. For us, we're pretty much doing what we've always done. Providing service. It's the kind of thing that customers don't get everywhere."

"Boom times or not, that standard has stayed the same. I think it's the customers who've changed though," he says, contemplating how the last few years have taken their toll on retail. "People are getting wiser about their purchases. And they're thinking of how stuff fits not only on them, but into their wardrobes. Combining formal shirts with casual wear."

Has the male Irish shopper become more discerning and more sartorially intelligent? "I'd say there's a lot of ladies still shopping for their men," Malone laughs.

"They're the ones who really pick up on different price points and

value. And appreciate items like free shirts and ties with suits."

While times may be testing, Malone remains refreshingly upbeat. "It's a fascinating time to be in retail," he proffers. "Certain customers are nice people again. When everyone seemed to be stuck in the property game, there was a brashness. That's changed. There's been a levelling, you could say. Better times ahead."

## Anthony Dunne of Chris Curtis, Drogheda

"Saturday. Now that was the day you'd see some business," recalls Anthony Dunne. "All changed now though. The trade days are more likely to be your Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It's the same throughout the town, maybe even the country. The quiet times are Thursday into the weekend."

"And we used to have a serious stream of builders and anyone involved in construction," says Dunne of his clientele. "They wanted the best of everything. All the brand names. Not the case now. The spend has certainly come down. But people still want quality. So, we've tailored to fit that."

Is that what's kept the doors open? "I'd say it's the service. I know, I know it sounds clichéd but nine out of ten of our customers are repeat business. And they've stayed loyal to us," Dunne says proudly. "We keep in touch. Let them know what's coming up on sale. No pressure. And as a result, I'd say we know most by their first names."

Who's doing the buying? "The ladies," he chuckles. "We've got our customers particulars on file. And that makes it easier for their partners, who might have to drag them in otherwise. Kicking and screaming. And we wouldn't want that. Ha!"