



Trail Blazer

**The long,
colorful tale
of a successful
uniform maven**



By Emily Dempsey

Michael Saxon refers to himself as the last of the mavens – “maven” being a Yiddish word for one who understands; an expert. He is an expert. He’s been in the uniform business for more than 70 years, and he’s learned a thing or two along the way. And although he’s now a 92-year-old East Coast transplant living the good life in Palm Beach, Fla., he still mans a company phone and fax machine that connects him to the office in Pittsburgh. Michael Saxon, president of Saxon Uniforms, is a wealth of knowledge about everything related to uniforms, sales and business. But don’t expect him to spend much time sharing his wisdom or reflecting on the past. He’d rather talk about his new blazer colors.

He has 15 blazer colors, to be exact. There’s Kelly green, which, he says, “is obviously popular among the Irish.” There’s royal blue, gold and regal purple. There is a blazer color to meet the needs of any company. Custom colors are also available. Offering these unique colors has allowed Saxon Uniforms to begin a new chapter in an already vibrant company history.

And the response has been overwhelming. Colleges, security companies, schools, casinos and other organizations are clamoring for colors that represent their unique identities. Saxon Uniforms now sells more than 30,000 blazers each year, a number that will only increase as companies search for new ways to assert their distinctiveness. The company even

plans to unveil a pink blazer in 2012. And while other companies scaled back offerings when the economic recession hit, Saxon is quick to say, “During the recession, we added five new colors.” That attitude is somehow expected from this man who launched a successful career during the Great Depression.

Saxon graduated from high school in 1935, right in the pit of the Great Depression. His father owned a second-hand clothing store in New York City, and Michael energized the business with his creativity. He relocated the store, now selling nearly new clothing, to a loft and advertised it on a popular radio program hosted by Alan Courtney. “Walk up and save” was the slogan that brought him success, but Saxon would soon walk away from his company.

He wanted to further his education, so he enrolled at New York University. And he crunched numbers at Pace College of Accounting. He learned about design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. And then he took a break from studying to fight for his country. After serving as a Damage Control Officer on a Coast Guard Destroyer Escort during World War II, Saxon returned to New York with a taste for excitement.

The nearly new clothing business wasn’t going to cut it. He needed glitz and glam, and the bright lights of Broadway beckoned. He began designing and manufacturing costumes for the shows of his day: *Guys and Dolls*, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and *Call Me ‘Madam.’* He drummed up dazzling outfits for the Radio City Christmas Show. He fashioned formal wear, band jackets and blazers that hit a high note with the likes of Tommy Dorsey, Jackie Gleason and Frank Sinatra.

Saxon was living the dream of every young starry-eyed New Yorker. But, he says, “The feast or famine nature of show business was wearing on me.” He longed for more steady, predictable work, and he found it in the uniform industry. Saxon set up shop in a Fifth Avenue office, and he began to build relationships with major corporations, including Loews Hotel Corporation, Shell Oil Company and Xerox.

And although he was leading a seemingly tame, conventional lifestyle as a uniform industry executive, he was the same impassioned

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Michael Saxon that he’d always been. He would approach uniform design with the same zest and creativity with which he had approached costume design. He believed that companies had stories to tell, and he would help weave those stories with his designs.

Instead of the typical catalog, Saxon distributed a “look book” of sorts, featuring storybook-style illustrations and a narrative that wittily condemned all things ordinary and outdated about the uniform industry. On the cover, Saxon boldly proclaimed that the Stone Age was over for uniforms, and in the introduction, he vowed to revolutionize the uniform industry with his innovative designs and devotion to quality. The illustrations, oozing with mod style and electric colors, exhibited his designs. A Sheraton Motor Inn hostess strikes a pose in fishnet stockings, a playful circle skirt, kitten heels and a cheeky top hat. An Anaheim Stadium employee casually tucks his Wayfarers into the pocket of his camel-colored bomber jacket, his other hand resting on the waistband of his rust-colored trousers. A Statler Hilton bellman strolls along in a snappy tuxedo, his gold lapel coordinating perfectly with the satin stripe on his pants.

The orders poured in. Saxton was soon creating imaginative, elaborate designs for the Playboy Clubs. He designed chic stewardess uniforms for Pan American World Airways, American Airlines and Trans Caribbean Airways – the kind of uniforms that evoke nostalgia for the glamour of air travel of the past. He dressed employees of the lavish Caesar’s Palace in tunics and togas and is still quite proud that he managed to make them look “Roman

without looking ridiculous.”

The orders kept pouring in. Saxon outfitted the stadium employees of Major League Baseball teams, including the St. Louis Cardinals and the Atlanta Braves. He supplied the uniforms for 34 of the 40 major pavilions at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York. He designed attire for employees at some of the finest luxury hotels, including the Waldorf-Astoria. He even created uniforms for Interpol. Saxon did not shy away from any industry. He designed everything from industrial coveralls to school jumpers to formal tailcoats, and he approached each and every challenge with enthusiasm.

His enthusiasm is not the only key to his success. He is also a savvy businessman. He recognized early on that designing uniforms for both men and women would set him apart from his competitors. While others were simply scaling down men’s uniforms to fit women, he was tailoring his designs specifically to fit a woman’s body. He also offered a wider range of sizes than anyone else and offered colors that nobody else did. He employed a design team to create custom designs when others were selling a set number of styles. He also concerned himself not just with dressing employees but with creating a look that contributed to a corporate identity, a new and foreign concept to most of his peers.

And he made blazers. Saxon recognized the blazer’s unparalleled ability to create a corporate identity. He created one-, two- and three-button blazers. He made double- and single-breasted styles. He designed classic men’s blazers as well as form-fitting styles for women. He offered patch pockets, flap pockets and even a patented “Tuck-Away Flap” pocket that allowed the wearer to display a company logo during business hours and tuck it away during after-hours cocktails. Saxon embroidered with the finest silk and metallic threads and would provide luxurious bullion embroidery services upon request. These blazers were sharp. They were polished and stylish. They were the blazers of choice for Ivy League universities, including Yale and Princeton. They were embraced by Chrysler and Ford during the golden age of the American automotive industry. And they helped



countless other companies establish identities, many of which have persisted throughout the years.

Saxon’s blazer business has been going strong ever since. But it really exploded about five years ago, when his son, Maxwell Saxon, who now runs the business out of Pittsburgh, set up websites for Saxon Uniforms, including one devoted solely to Blazers ‘R’ Us. The introduction of the new blazer colors also has had a tremendous impact on Saxon Uniforms and has helped to ensure that Saxon Uniforms will continue blazing trails in the blazer business as well as the uniform industry for many years to come. **M**

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