

Dutch retailer plans three outlets in Africa

If the maxim "a well tailored suit is to women what lingerie is to men" then Africa's dapper executives might appreciate the first of three planned outlets on the continent by Dutch retailer Suitsupply.

By [Zeenat Moorad](#) 4 Jul 2014



Image via [Twitter](#)

Rising affluence and a gap in the made-to-measure menswear category is attracting international brands to sub-Saharan Africa, despite underdeveloped retail markets and infrastructure challenges.

Ermenegildo Zegna, which makes suits worn by Hollywood stars George Clooney and Robert De Niro, opened a store in Nigeria last year. German fashion house Hugo Boss already has a presence in several countries including Nigeria, Mozambique, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire and SA.

Suitsupply sets itself apart through its supply chain by cutting out payments to third-party companies or middle-men that usually move suits into larger department chains. By controlling production, from design to distribution, the company can offer a modern, tailored suit made from fine Italian fabrics from as low as R4,500, compared to a luxe designer version that typically starts at about R7,000.

Fabrics sourced from northern Italy

CEO and founder of Suitsupply, Fokke de Jong said the suits were given structure through a floating canvas inside the jacket. "We use very thin layers of cotton where horse and camel hair are weaved in - this gives you thin seams a very natural kind of feel and the suit forms to the body and you have a more tailored and elegant suit instead of a boxy, too-wide jacket," he said.

Fabrics are sourced from mills in northern Italy's Biella. The region's fabric factories also service high-end luxury purveyors such as Prada, Chanel and Etro.

In 2011, *The Wall Street Journal* set up a blind review of suits from Suitsupply, and international brands including H&M, J Crew, Hart Schaffner Marx, Target and Armani.

Men's suit designer and professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Salvatore Giardina and Salvatore Cesarani, a designer and professor at Parsons The New School for Design, found that the \$614 Suitsupply suit matched the \$3,625 Armani suit in quality. The J Crew suit fared well, while the others failed to hit the spot.

Offbeat locations for stores

Avoiding high traffic malls, Suitsupply picks offbeat locations for its stores, to keep prices down and allow for a more relaxed shopping environment.

In SA, it has launched a "mansion" concept - opting to rent a villa in upmarket suburb Hyde Park, for six months.

Tania Habimana, the sub-Saharan Africa GM said permanent stores would open in Nigeria, Kenya and SA.

"Africa is the next continent, it's the place to go. We were getting a lot of travelling customers from SA and the rest of Africa who were visiting our stores in New York, Milan and London, asking when we'd open. We believe in the African market. African men love looking good and at the same time, they want pocket-friendly prices with a bit of luxury. Our brand combines high-quality tailoring, modern techniques and time-honoured," Ms Habimana said.

Demand from African customers through website

Suitsupply, which has 50 stores globally, has already seen demand from African customers through its online shopping website, which ships worldwide.

The company introduced country-specific payment including cash on delivery, M-Pesa in Kenya and Interswitch in Nigeria and are able to ship anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa within four days.

"We take care of all the duties, customs and clearing so a customer has a seamless online experience - there is no extra charges, which is what some South Africans experience when buying from overseas brands," De Jong said.

E-commerce is a sizable part of its total business - about 20% of Suitsupply suits are sold through the website.

While the European market had been struggling, the company has bucked this trend and its like-for-like sales were robust De Jong said. "We opened around ten stores last year and are hoping to do another 15-20 in the next 12 months, sales were growing last year at about 40%," he said.

As the story goes, De Jong was only 27 years old and completing a law degree at a University in Holland when he started selling clothes from the boot of his car to fraternity members who wanted to have coats with their frat letters on them.

He went further and began organising trunk shows, selling suits to his friends, fellow students and employees at the school and as his small operation blossomed, Mr de Jong decided to concentrate fully on his clothing business, and Suitsupply was born.

Onsite tailoring

The company now offers onsite tailoring while you wait on simple jobs such as hemming pants, shortening sleeves or adding shoulder pads.

Apart from accessories and its off-the-rack collection, the privately-owned company offers a pricier bespoke service. Clients can select Mother of Pearl buttons, whether they want single or double breasted closings - with an array of more than 60 fabrics varieties to choose from.

"From our online purchases, we've noticed a little bit more of a colourful selection... not as colourful as the Nigerians but definitely a little bit more outspoken than the European markets, who are more conservative.

"They will only wear suits to go to work whereas I found in the SA market, the combination of the suit jacket with a trouser, jean or chino is used more often," Ms Habimana said.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge