

Running the Fashion Design Business

Unit 16

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Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this Unit the learner will be able to:

- Explain the role of advertising and marketing in fashion industry
- Explore different types of selling techniques
- Describe the importance of good customer service in fashion design business
- Explore techniques for running the fashion design business successfully

Traditionally, it starts as a one person business or at least as a small family business with one person very much in charge. That person will do virtually everything, starting with market research: i.e. finding a niche which a small firm can develop, maybe by supplying a particular customer. That person will certainly come up with styles and will produce the patterns and carry out all the buying of fabric and trimmings, in order to start the production process. In all probability they will employ machinists, maybe their own family, although inevitably they will have to train them. They will certainly do the selling, i.e. the contact with the major customers. There is in fact no management organisation; one person alone is the manager with no delegation apart from instructions passed on to machinists. In some operations the work may be done on a CMT (cut, make and trim) basis, so that the owner/manager may have to produce specifications for outside contractors to work to. As the business expands and more people are employed, there will come a point when delegation takes place

Financing For the Manufacturer

Most retailers buy from manufacturers on credit allowances. That is, they need not pay for the merchandise for thirty to sixty days. This creates a financial problem for the manufacturer, who must buy fabric and trims and pay for labour and overhead. Thus, apparel manufacturers turn to banks, finance companies, and *factoring* firms for financing. *Bank loans* are either *unsecured*, for well-capitalized companies with a history of good performance, or *secured*, which means they must be backed by collateral in the form of equipment or property.

A manufacturer could also sell its *accounts receivable* (unpaid orders) to a *factor* (a certain type of finance company) for a cash loan or for credit protection. If the customer fails to pay, the factor absorbs the loss. Factors charge a commission to cover collection services and to protect against credit losses. They also charge interest on cash advances. In *accounts-*

receivable financing, manufacturers are loaned funds regularly, also based on open accounts receivable. However, in this case the manufacturer handles the collections and takes the credit risk. All three of these methods of financing give the manufacturer cash to continue production.

Purchasing of Piece Goods

Ordering the materials necessary to produce garments is usually done by the manufacturer's fabric or piece goods buyer. The fabric buyer may simply order goods, or may also have the responsibility, along with the designer, of selecting them. The fabric buyer acts as a liaison between the mill or converter and the manufacturer, who must have a good credit rating in order to purchase the fabrics. Generally, volume manufacturers purchase goods from large textile companies that can handle big orders. Ordering in quantity may give the manufacturer a lower price per yard. The goal of a volume manufacturer is to obtain the lowest-priced goods at the widest width. In addition, the volume manufacturer has the opportunity to re colour prints, order special dyes, or have its own print or yarn-dye pattern. Conversely, small manufacturers usually deal with smaller textile firms, which can do shorter runs. The buyer must know all the properties of fabrics and information on prices, availability, and delivery. For example, manufacturers on the West Coast pay more than others for delivery of raw materials, and deliveries to them take longer.

The buyer must figure the amounts of yardage needed, first to cut duplicates and later for stock. Orders for stock yardage must be based on past sales or on expectations of future sales percentages. Textile sales people encourage manufacturers to make a commitment early in the season to buy a specific amount of yardage. Ordering in advance ensures the availability and on-time delivery of a popular fabric, which may subsequently be in short supply. Volume orders usually require a seven- to eight-week lead time for delivery. Popular fashion fabrics and yarn dyes can require as much as a six-month lead time. The manufacturer must also consider how much fabric may be needed for possible reorders. There is not enough time after reorders are in to wait for another fabric shipment. On the other hand, the manufacturer takes a great risk by stocking up for anticipated orders.

To eliminate some of this risk, manufacturers often commit for greige goods only, to be dyed later. Then, as sales information becomes more precise, colours can be *assorted*. In other words, the greige goods can be dyed in their various colours according to the sales percentage established for each.

Trimmings

The fabric buyer or a separate buyer buys trimmings and findings. Findings and trimmings are materials used to finish garments or fashion accessories. Findings are functional and include linings, zippers, thread, and seam tape. Trimmings are decorative, such as buttons, braids, laces, and belts. Trimmings must have the same care properties as the fabrics used in the garment. For example if the fabric can be safely washed, so must the trimmings. As trimmings and findings arrive at the plant, they must be sorted and inspected, along with fabrics. Other sundries purchased by the trimmings buyer include labels; hang tags, hangers, and plastic bags.

Piece Goods Inspection

As fabric is received in the factory, it must be carefully counted to make sure the total order has been received. In large factories, special equipment automatically counts the fabric yardage as it rolls from one bolt to another. The fabric is then pulled by rollers over large viewing tables so that it can be checked for flaws. Flaws are marked with coloured threads or *flags* at the side of the fabric so that they can be avoided in cutting. If there are too many defects, such as holes or shading, the fabric is returned to the mill for a refund. (The manufacturer may pay a premium to have the mill do this inspection.) Some companies build a strong reputation on the reliability of their product. They perform washing, dry-cleaning, steaming, and pressing tests to check tensile strength, durability, colour cracking, colour fastness, and shrinkage. They also test how the fabric holds up during sewing-whether needles pull it or edges fray excessively. Colours in coordinates must match. Coordinating tops and bottoms should be cut from the same dye lot, and at the very least shipments to the same store must be within acceptable variations of colour if from different dye lots.

Production Scheduling

The head of production makes up a production schedule or *issue plan* to ensure that delivery dates are met. This schedule is a reverse timetable, usually covering six months. The first date on the schedule is a shipping date that will meet the retail store's order requirements. The schedule progresses backward to include completion dates, cutting dates, and so on,

Planning and Direction

In planning promotions a store must decide what group of consumers it wants to reach (its target market), and what fashion image it wants to project. Ideally, when a company or

store opens, it establishes a policy regarding its image and its customers. However, a store occasionally revamps or updates its fashion image because of changes in the neighbourhood or in fashion style and taste.

Sales promotions must be an integral part of the year's merchandising plan. In addition to promoting the six possible fashion seasons (holiday, resort, spring, summer, transitional, and fall), stores schedule traditional activities throughout the retail calendar. These include bridal fashion shows, January and August white sales (sheets, towels, and table linens), special features for Christmas and other holidays, back-to-school sales, and so on. In small stores, a single person may handle all promotional activities with the help of outside consultants or agencies. In a large store, a sales promotion director manages or coordinates the joint efforts of advertising, special events, display, public relations and the fashion office. The sales promotion director is responsible for setting goals and making general plans. Together, the sales promotion director, the directors of each promotional area, and buyers, must decide what to promote, when to promote it, and how to reach their target market.

Fashion Advertising

The largest part of the sales promotion budget in a retail store is normally allocated to advertising (approximately 1 to 3 percent of sales), and a large share of the advertising budget goes toward newspaper space. Advertising involves the planning, writing, designing, and scheduling of paid announcements designed to attract customer's attention to a fashion product or event. Thus, advertising is the use of paid time or space in media. (such as television, radio, newspaper, magazines, billboards, and direct mail).

Kinds of Advertising

Stores use two basic types of advertisement. They try either to sell their image or to sell a specific item. Institutional or prestige advertisement draws attention to the store (the institution) rather than to the specific product for sale. The focus is on fashion image, fashion leadership, community goodwill, a new or remodelled store or a special event. The best advertising is always planned from the *customer's point of view*. In fashion advertising, the customer should be able to picture how attractive he or she will look wearing the advertised item. Advertising must also be truthful, to build customer confidence and create a good reputation for the manufacturer or the store.

Scheduling and Planning

Ads and promotional events are sometimes scheduled up to six months ahead of the selling season. Like any other plan, the advertising plan is based on past experience, present conditions, and future expectations. An advertising plan is a guide for a specific period (such as a week, a quarter of the year, or a season) and for the amount of advertising that a store intends to do in that period to attract customers. A budget is prepared, telling how much money will be allocated for advertising. Advertising space in newspapers or time on radio or television must be contracted. A timetable is developed detailing how the ad production is to be carried out, and by whom, in order to meet media deadlines.

Media

To be effective, fashion advertising has to be noticed. In advertising, *media* is a general term used to cover all methods of transmitting a sales message. Advertisers must choose the medium that will best promote an event or best reach a specific target market. The media include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, billboards, displays, and direct mail. Generally, fashion advertising is visually oriented, the philosophy being "why tell it if you can show it." Decisions are made not only about which general medium will be used, but also about which particular radio or television station, newspaper, or magazine will reach the appropriate customer for specific merchandise. Each consumer group has unique tastes, ideas, and interests, and consequently responds to different media. Advertising departments or agencies must determine the best possible combination of media to reach a particular target market. Several ads are usually placed in different media to support each other and strengthen the campaign. To balance the spot radio commercial aimed at the car commuter, the store might also place an ad covering the same material in the newspaper, for bus and train commuters to read. Repetition is a necessary part of advertising, for it maintains public interest. Consistency is equally important. The same ad read at the same time every day on the radio, or a fashion ad in the same illustration style every week on the same page in the newspaper, makes people keenly aware of the store or brand name, as well as of the fashion message.

Newspaper Advertising

Newspaper advertising is popular among most fashion retailers because (1) it provides visual as well as verbal means of telling consumers what merchandise the company has to offer; (2) it may be offered daily, which is important in the quickly changing fashion business; (3) layouts, art, and copy are relatively easy to produce; and (4) media costs are comparatively low. The retailer buys space in newspapers that reach its potential customers. Day after day, readers in specific geographical areas or trade groups are exposed

to the company's fashion message. The producer or retailer can even buy a certain desirable position in the paper, such as the back page of the front section, often paying premium rates to have their ads appear in the same place each day.

Magazine Advertising

Large retailers regularly advertise in fashion magazines because they can benefit from national circulation. Magazines also have regional editions that carry inserted pages of local retail store advertising.

Radio and Television Advertising

Television commercials are becoming increasingly popular for fashion advertising. Television has the advantage of being able to show how clothing might fit into a real life situation. The major drawback to TV advertising is the cost of air time and production. Commercials are usually produced by agencies, but less expensive ones can be produced by local TV stations. In either case, they are made under the direction of the retailer. The cost of air time is determined by the length of the commercial and the time of day it is to be shown. Television prime time-the most expensive is between 7 and 11 P.M when the greatest number of adult viewers watches TV.

However, radio can make the listener aware of a store location or brand name. Peak radio listening hours, which cost more than others, are during "drive time," the rush hours when commuters listen most to their car radios. Stations are selected for their target market appeal. If the target market for a particular campaign is professional men and women, they might be reached most effectively by spot radio ads on a news programme at rush hour, as they commute to or from work. A radio spot would reach teens as well, but a rock music programme would be a better choice.

Direct-Mail Advertising

Direct mail is a highly effective form of advertising because it is personally addressed to each potential customer. The recipients are proven charge customers. Many stores mail specific catalogues to target audiences, such as furniture customers, the large-size markets, and cosmetic purchasers. Direct mail includes catalogues and statement enclosures (provided by manufacturers), often sent with monthly billings to charge customers. Mail-order catalogues have become a tremendously popular form of advertising because of the shopping convenience they provide to working women.

Cooperative Advertising

Fibre producers and manufacturers often cooperate financially on advertisements with retailers who feature their merchandise. Co-op allocations are based on a percentage of net sales to the retailer and may provide up to 50 percent of media costs. Most large retail stores have in-house advertising departments. The director of the advertising department supervises three divisions: art, copy, and production.

Art

The art division is responsible for *layouts*, sketches of how the ad will look. Department or free lance artists execute the final drawings, or photographers take pictures. The use of photography is currently popular because its realistic qualities lend themselves to promotional or direct-sell advertising. Illustrations are especially appropriate for institutional ads, where the creation of an illusion may be important.

Copy

Copywriters produce the word descriptions in an ad. The good writer pictures the customer who is reading the ad and writes to him or her. Sales copy, which stresses value, is quite different from high-fashion copy, which emphasizes glamour.

Production

The production department *pastes up* all parts of the ad into a mechanical composition according to the layout. It is the mechanical technician's responsibility to see that the finished ad is the same as the original idea and layout. Production is also in charge of *traffic*, the flow of artwork and copy among the store, printers, engravers, photographers, newspapers, and radio and television stations. Beginning artists often start as paste-up artists in retail production departments.

Advertising Agencies

Stores that have no in-house advertising departments pay commissions or fees to an outside agency to create advertisements and images for them. Agencies also produce television and radio advertisements for stores whose own advertising facilities produce only newspaper ads. An ad agency is usually paid a monthly retainer fee or a commission based on space and time bought in newspapers, magazines, television, and radio.

Publicity

Publicity is the voluntary spreading of information about people, special events, or newsworthy topics through various communications media. Publicity helps promote the sale of fashion merchandise by making a style, manufacturer, retailer, trend or other aspect of fashion better known to the public. There are no media costs for publicity, but for that very reason it is difficult to obtain. Media editors choose the material they will use because they think it may be of interest to the community. The media also dictate how, when, and where the message will be used.

Obtaining Publicity

Retailers hope to bring their names to the public eye by calling attention to newsworthy developments in their stores. They may even create events such as fashion shows or celebrity personal appearances to obtain publicity. Stores provide the media with information about such events or topics in the hope that the media will publicise them. Retailers send publicity releases to all the media. A news release is a written statement of the important facts about a person, place, or coming event, often accompanied by glossy photographs. Many releases and photographs are provided by merchandise vendors. Publicity material is sent to the media by either the public relations office or the fashion office, whichever is more concerned with the topic or event.

Media that Give Publicity

To achieve maximum benefit from publicity, retailers send publicity material to the media whose audience would be most interested in their message. Retail merchants try to obtain publicity in both print and broadcast media. Newspaper fashion editors often use publicity photos and information to write their articles. Radio and television also give some publicity, especially to their advertisers.

Special Events

Special events bring potential customers together at the store or create goodwill. Holding special events that cater to the interests of the public encourages recreational shopping, shopping with friends or family as a leisure activity. Special events represent an attempt to replace the personal customer contact that has been lost in many large stores. They build a sense of loyalty and create a community spirit that draws consumers into the store.

Fashion Shows

Fashion shows are special events that communicate a fashion story. There are two basic types of fashion shows.

The informal show

The *informal show* is easier to produce and effective on a personal level. A few models walk around the store, showing the fashions they are wearing to customers who are shopping or having lunch in the store's restaurant. The models can take their time and customers enjoy asking them questions.

The Formal or Runway Show

The *formal or runway* show takes a great deal of advance planning: booking models and fittings and arranging for a runway, scenery (if desired), lighting, microphones, music, and seating. Rehearsals are necessary because these shows have become increasingly theatrical. Also, there must be advance publicity and advertising to ensure that the show will have a large audience. If the main objective of a fashion show is sales, it is best to have the show in the store-if possible, in the department whose clothes are being shown. If the primary purpose of the show is goodwill, such as in a charity event, it may be held outside the store in appropriate facilities. Fashion shows may be organized by the special events office, the fashion office, or both.

The Fashion Office

The function of the fashion office differs from store to store. In group or chain flagship stores, the fashion office is headed by the *fashion director* who has the responsibility of setting the fashion image for the whole store. In a smaller or branch store, the head of the fashion office is usually called a *fashion coordinator*. In either case, the fashion office produces fashion shows and works with the display, advertising, and special events departments, as well as buyers, to keep a uniform fashion message throughout the store.

Visual Presentation

Visual presentation or display of merchandise communicates store image and fashion ideas to the consumer. In recent years, retailers have been placing greater emphasis on the presentation of merchandise. Display artists decorate all store windows and create interior displays of merchandise. An attention getting window can entice a shopper into the store to look around. The prospective customer is further exposed to fashion and accessory purchase suggestions by interior displays.

Window Displays

Window displays are art forms created with merchandise and props, just as garment design is art created with fabric. Display artists use the same elements and principles of good design as garment designers. In planning windows, buyers choose garments that carry out the promotional theme and image of the store. These garments and accessories are usually the most dramatic and fashionable of an assortment. Windows can set a mood, convey a fashion message, or directly sell merchandise.

Mood Windows

Mood windows convey the spirit of a holiday season. Rather than directly promoting purchases, they suggest the idea of gift giving or decorating at Christmas and other holidays.

Fashion Message Windows

Fashion message windows, feature the newest fashion trends and suggest ways to coordinate accessories for the newest looks. These windows are created to attract attention and to stimulate the customer to buy a new garment and/ or accessory.

Direct-Sell Windows

Direct sell windows, used mostly by stores that carry popularly priced merchandise, show a representative assortment of the store's merchandise accompanied by prices, to tempt the customer with a possible bargain.

Interior Displays

Interior displays have two purposes, one general and one specific. The first is to relate generally to the surrounding area; the second is to entice the customer to buy specific merchandise. They may carry out the theme of window presentations or highlight interesting merchandise from the department. Interior displays may take the form of *vignettes* or *life-style displays* (mannequins posed in a scene and dressed appropriately), or *single items* (shown on a form or stand). New and exciting approaches to visual presentation have been inspired by the Japanese trend toward minimal stock displays. This trend has brought about new fixtures on which to display merchandise.

Evaluation

At the end of a promotional event or an advertising campaign, sales are analyzed and the campaign's effectiveness evaluated. Advertising can be evaluated by sales volume. However, it is very difficult to analyze sales results in relation to display or special events. For example, unless a fashion show actually takes place in the middle of a department and people stay afterward to make purchases, which can prove the value of the event? That is why, when budgets are cut, special events are often the first casualties. Management evaluates the effectiveness of a campaign and then makes recommendations for the next year. Another cycle is complete: a plan made, carried out, and evaluated.

Mail-Order Retailing

Many people dislike the inconvenience of fighting traffic and going from store to store in search of a coordinating wardrobe or the perfect gift. The increasing numbers of working women find they do not have time to shop-it is easier to order from catalogues at home and to have the merchandise delivered.

Catalogues can be expensive to prepare and distribute, but it costs even more to maintain stores and sales staff.

Online orders

With the advancement of technology people have become so busy; most people prefer to shop on line through internet. Most people because of their busy schedules place their orders online and receive them through mailing service which in turn is very cost effective for the fashion designers as well, especially for those who just start up their fashion design practice. It saves their costs on sales staff and administration as well. Orders can be placed on phone as well. Fashion designers with low start up budget can consider starting with an online fashion store.

But before starting an online fashion store the designer must need to determine what types of products he/she plans to sell in the fashion store. Most stores focus on a particular niche, and target demographic. Is it upscale, high fashion, or everyday casual wear? Are the target people older or younger? Are they wealthier, or of more modest income? Does the designer want to design and sell work uniforms, athletic gear, baby clothes, teen fashions, big and tall, men's clothes, women's clothes or mix and match. The possibilities are almost endless.

Category Distinctions

Distinctions among the different kinds of retail stores are breaking down. For instance, mail-order businesses now operate department stores, and vice versa; many department stores have boutiques or specialty shops within them; some discount stores have tried trading up (to carry better merchandise). An overlap of price points exists among them. Thus, categorizing retail stores has become complex. This breakdown of distinctions can be dangerous for a store that moves out of its price or merchandise-assortment niche in the retail market.

Customer Services

Today, some stores offer an increasing number of customer services, such as fashion consulting, no question return privileges, no-interest credit plans, national credit card acceptance, gift wrapping, free local delivery, and free parking.

But although the number of services has increased, the quality of service seems to be deteriorating in many stores. Salespeople are often unavailable or else ignorant about stock; stores do not mail gifts overseas (as they do in Europe); and there are long waiting lines for boxes or gift wrapping. Stores should consider developing a more personal approach toward customer services and perhaps offer multilingual aids for foreigners who visit or live in the UK. Over the years retail stores, especially those close to suburban residential areas, have been staying open longer in the evenings and on weekends, including Sundays, for the convenience of their customers obviously, shopping has become a leisure time activity; Sunday store openings allow the whole family to shop together.

Leased Departments

To provide additional services for their customers, many stores lease certain departments to an outside organization better able to handle a particular specialty. Leased departments in retail stores are merchandised, owned, and operated by an outside firm rather than by the store itself. The public is not aware of this, however, because the leased department fits the store's overall image. Services commonly leased are restaurants, hairdressing salons, shoe repair, and jewellery repair. In addition, some merchandise departments are leased, especially furs, millinery, shoes, and fine jewellery.

The Store Image

Each store must decide on which potential customers it wants to reach and how it wants to reach them. Whether setting up a new store or reevaluating an existing one, management

must study the type of people who live in the community, their life-styles, and ultimately their shopping wants and needs. It must then determine how to fill these wants and needs.

Target Customers

The first step in reaching potential customers is to define exactly who they should be. No retail store can be all things to all people; it must select one or a few groups of people to serve. '*Target customers*' is the term for the group of consumers the store wishes to attract. Groups of target customers are within a general age range, have similar life-styles, and therefore have similar tastes. Their tastes, and whether they are fashion leaders or fashion followers, can also be identified with the acceptance stages of a fashion cycle. If a store wishes to cater to the tastes of several groups, it will merchandise a separate department to appeal to each. For example, the women's wear styling categories (designer, missy, contemporary, and junior) appeal to different customer groups and thus are separated into different store departments.

Defining the Store Image

It is of prime importance for each store to clearly define its *image*, the personality or character that it presents to the public. Its particular *fashion image* is the degree of fashion leadership it endeavours to provide. The store's merchandising, interior decoration, promotion, and customer services develop, maintain and reflect that image: In keeping with their image, retailers strive for a store atmosphere that is both a complementary background for their merchandise and a warm, environment for the customer. Architects, interior designers, and display personnel work to achieve a store image or personality that customers can identify with, and generate excitement about the merchandise and creates a desire to buy. Boutiques have the easiest job creating a warm, inviting atmosphere. Their very smallness creates cosiness. To compete with the popularity of boutiques, large stores often use the store-within-a-store or boutique concept: each department is treated as an individual shop, with decor and atmosphere appropriate to its unique merchandise.

Degree of Fashion Leadership

Along with suiting merchandising policy to store image and target customers, the store must determine what role it wishes to play in fashion leadership. Naturally, the store's role is directly linked to the customers' concept of what is fashionable. Store fashion leadership tends to fall into three loosely defined categories, no matter what the store size:

1. Stores with a strong fashion image seek leadership by carrying the newest fashions. Most of their customers too are fashion leaders, who accept the latest styles at the beginning of their cycles.
2. Others try to compete with promotional stores (stores which can charge lower prices due to low overhead) on prices in some areas.
3. *Mass merchants* restrict their fashion offerings to proven styles because they appeal to fashion followers, who purchase only styles they are used to seeing on others. Fashion looks reach these stores later than the others because of the time it takes mass producers to copy them at low prices.

As fashion reaches this level, it all begins to look alike: everyone is copying everyone else. An example of a mass merchant is Sears.

Selling

The Role of a Sales Representative

The actual selling of manufactured goods to retail buyers is done by sales representatives. A line may be wonderfully merchandised and designed, but the sales rep still must communicate its concept to the buyer. Some large companies employ a salaried sales staff. Most, however, use independent sales representatives who may carry one or more noncompeting lines. They are paid on commission ranging from 5 percent to 10 percent and averaging 7 percent. Commission is usually paid on orders actually shipped to and accepted by the stores.

The rep usually sets up a presentation in a centrally located hotel room, where buyers from the area can come to see the line. Manufacturers' representatives rarely have time to visit each store personally, but they may do it to win a new account. Apparel salespeople must understand their product, the entire industry, marketing, the economy, and the needs of retail stores. They try to establish contacts and a customer following. A sales rep tries to recommend to the retailer when and how much of a line should be bought, on the basis of the store's image and customers. A good salesperson can give the manufacturer valuable information about retail needs and line evaluation for the purpose of production control.

Computerization

The most important innovation in the sales and distribution of fashion merchandise is the extensive use of computers. Ideally, computers should help to do the figuring and free time for aesthetics. Computers are used to plan, monitor, and recap a selling season. To *plan* a season, spread sheets are made showing what needs to be produced and sold per month to reach sales and profit goals. This process used to take three to four days, but with the help

of a computer it can take as little as three to four hours. A merchandiser or sales manager armed with a computer doesn't have to do multiple drafts on a typewriter and thus is free to do more experimenting with a variety of plans. The computer is quicker and easier. To *monitor* a season, a computer can keep track of inventory, sales, and customer service. A computer keeps an inventory of what fabric has been ordered, what cuts have been issued, what garments are in production, and what finished garments are in stock. It keeps track of shipments and adjusts inventory records accordingly.

When sales reps put in an order, the computer instantly lets them know what's available and what delivery dates a customer can expect. The computer also helps the customer service department follow up on a sale by printing invoices, handling reorders, and even pre marking for retailers.

To *recap* at the end of a season, merchandisers and sales managers can use computer sales records to compare actual sales figures with the original plan and see if sales and profit goals were met. These records also give merchandisers and designers specific information on what colours, styles, fabrications, price ranges, and so on, sold best. This information will help them plan future lines.

Quality Control

Quality control in clothing manufacture has in the past tended to mean final inspection with a little 'in process' inspection sometimes added. On the other hand, Total Quality Control hinges on creating an awareness of quality achievement throughout the whole business. It includes inspection routines of course, but relies much more on emphasising to everyone in the company that aspects of their job influence the finished quality of their product.

Quality Assurance

The term 'quality assurance' is a phrase which is increasingly used in relation to the maintenance of quality. In general there are two different generic uses of the term.

The first, generally termed 'quality control', is characterised by attention to issues arising from the production of garments, rather than to issues deriving from the original design or the design of the production process itself. Responsibility for quality rests with inspectors rather than with the designers or production staff. It is a system commonly employed in the clothing industry, where frequent changes of design occur, especially in women's fashion garments, faults are returned frequently to machinists, or deductions made from payment, it can reduce motivation.

The second model of quality assurance can be characterised by the phrase, 'Quality cannot be inspected into a garment, it must be manufactured into it'. This can be applied on three levels. First and most simply, defects are traced back to the production process and the causes eliminated. The second level, which is more comprehensive, is often termed 'Total Quality Control'. Here the need for sustained quality performance is acknowledged to involve all relevant areas of the organisation and its suppliers, levels of monitoring their product. Thirdly, company-wide quality control requires the commitment of individuals in all departments, not just in production, focused by methods such as quality circles.

Study of Customer Requirements

In the clothing industry customer requirements cannot by any means be described solely in functional quantitative terms such as the strength of a seam, the size of a pocket or the flexural rigidity of an interlining. They must in varying degrees meet the dictates of fashion. It is important for a company to define accurately the garment properties expected in its price band.

Satisfactory Design of the Garment

The design process must also overcome the problem of fit. Bespoke garments are cut to fit an individual whose measurements and figure characteristics are known before manufacturing begins. Ready-to-wear garments are cut to fit categories of people whose measurements and figure characteristics are not known individually before manufacturing begins. The degree of fit which results is often therefore in some sense approximate, but it must be close enough, with or without alteration, to satisfy the customers' requirements. The concept of fit might imply different ideas from one garment to another: loose enough with a nightdress, tight enough with jeans, or the improvement of the figure by camouflaging or enhancing bust size. A satisfactory design of garment involves the cutting of not one, but a range of sizes. To satisfy the requirements of a range of sizes the design process must have an attitude toward a national system of size coding, and must decide what body measurements in its garments will be represented by the coding, what additions to make to body measurements for ease and comfort in wear, and what allowances to make for different styling features.

A satisfactory design of garment also demands decisions concerning the method of assembly. The designer will choose the seam type and stitch type which gives the best combination of aesthetics, strength, elasticity, durability and so on.

User Experience and Feedback

Many companies respect customers' complaints and generally reimburse the customer without question. The certainty of reimbursement should concentrate the efforts of the manufacturing department on finding the cause of the defect which led to the complaint. One customer's complaint may represent many other customers who do not complain and the company must take notice until it can prove this is an isolated case. Thus the cycle of quality control returns to its starting point - a study of customers' requirements. Ultimately quality assessment is in the hands of the customer and therefore complaints from customers are of paramount importance in determining whether an adequate quality assurance scheme operates. Too often quality controllers see a complaints department as a judgment on their own efficiency, rather than as part of the whole quality control operation.

There are many causes of customer complaint but one common cause is the breaking of a factory habit or routine. A rare complaint is a garment without buttons; this is almost invariably a garment which has been rectified on the line, has then become late or overdue for delivery, has been re-pressed in a hurry and disappeared before the buttons could be replaced. While some customers' complaints may be unjustified in terms of what can reasonably be expected of a garment (and may occasionally be fraudulent), an efficient quality assurance operation separating the justified from the unjustified and feeding the information back to design, manufacturing and inspection systems can only benefit the company's quality and its image. What is attainable is a comprehensive quality assurance scheme fully implemented.

The Designer and Quality Control

The designer plays a key role in the achievement of quality targets. Two definitions need to be borne in mind at the beginning.

(1) Quality of design means the value inherent in the garment; the functional and perceived value of the materials (silk versus cotton, polyester/wool versus polyester/viscose, real mother-of-pearl and horn buttons and so on), and the amount of work content (a lined versus an unlined skirt, the number of pockets in a suit, taped hems versus overlocked hems).

(2) Quality of design is a combination of aesthetics, performance and price, appropriate to the individual customer; obtaining a good balance of these is the chief requirement of good design. Quality of conformity means that it is essential that this quality is maintained in the individual garments produced against the original design.

The responsibilities of the designer of course include all aspects of quality of design. The designer must compare the cost of achieving the value in the garment with the returns from this quality - the price that can be charged. As value increases, the price a company can

charge increases, but ever more slowly. Costs are the opposite and the costs of fabric, trims and work content increase ever more quickly. In any company's range of options there is a point of maximum profit. Below this point a lesser profit comes from the lower price a company can charge; above this point a lower profit comes from the higher costs involved.

The designer also has responsibilities in the area of quality of conformity. In simple terms the garments must be as easy as possible to make within the requirements of the given style. Standardisation is a dirty word in a fashion industry, but there are some ways to categorise the variety. For instance, there are relationships which can be standardised. The relationship between the edge of a fusible interlining and the edge of the outer fabric should wherever possible be the same. Operators are more likely to form a habit and get it right. Similarly, notches on seams should be found in the same part of the seam. Wherever possible the two plies of a seam should have equal profiles, which is much easier to sew than joining a straight edge to a round edge or joining opposite curves. Of course, opposite curves as on a 'princess' line dress is sometimes unavoidable.

Suggested Further Readings:

- **How to Set Up and Run a Fashion Label (By Toby Meadows)**
- **The Business of Fashion: Designing, Manufacturing, and Marketing, 4th Edition (By Leslie Davis Burns)**