



UNIT-11

Running the Fashion Design Business

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

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

Unit 11

Running the Fashion Design Business

Most often, fashion businesses begin with one person or a small group working together with one person in charge. It is usually this one person who will be responsible for most key tasks, including:

- Market research – finding a niche which can be developed, often catering to a particular type of customer.
- Designing – being the creative force who develops styles and produce patterns.
- Purchasing what's needed – including all fabrics and trimmings.
- Hiring – if and when the business begins to grow, this person will be responsible for employing machinists (sometimes, these may be their own family members who will need to be trained).
- Selling – contacting buyers and promotion of goods with major customers.

So, usually a small fashion business has only one manager, who will pass on instructions to the machinist(s). Sometimes the work may be done on a CMT (cut, make, trim) basis, and in these cases the owner/manager may have to produce specifications for outside contractors to work with. Only if and when the business grows will the owner/manager begin delegating duties to employees.

Financing for the Manufacturer

In most cases, retailers buy from manufacturers on credit allowances. They buy products, but do not need to pay for them for around 30 to 60 days, depending on the agreement made. This can and often does create a problem for the manufacturer, who must make an initial outlay for fabric, trims, labour costs and any overheads. In order to get this done, many manufacturers will approach finance companies, banks or investment firms for financing. In the case of bank loans, they will either be *unsecured* for well-financed companies with good performance histories, or *secured*, in which case they must have some collateral to put up, such as property or equipment.

Other options for manufacturers would be to sell their *accounts receivable*, or unpaid orders, to a *factor*, which is a particular type of finance company. This way, they could get a loan or even credit protection. If the customer does not pay for whatever reason, it is the factor which will absorb the loss. A factor will charge a commission, in order to protect against credit loss or cover collection services. Interest is also charged on cash advances. In *accounts-receivable financing*, manufacturers receive regular loans. In such cases, it is the manufacturer that will handle any collections and also take any credit risk. Whichever method is chosen, these choices allow the manufacturer to obtain the required cash to facilitate production.

Purchasing of Piece Goods

The manufacturer's fabric and piece goods buyer is the person who usually orders the materials necessary to create garments. He/she may order goods only, or have broader responsibilities such as selecting goods, alongside the designer. The fabric buyer is the liaison between the mill (or converter) and the manufacturer. It is necessary for the manufacturer to have a good credit rating in order to purchase fabrics. Volume manufacturers usually buy goods from large textile companies, which are able to handle very large orders. The manufacturers may be able to get lower prices per yard, if they order large quantities. Their goal is to get the required goods at the lowest prices. The volume manufacturer can also re-colour prints, have their own print and yarn-dye patterns made or order special dyes. It is usually the case that smaller manufacturers deal with smaller textile companies. These smaller firms can do shorter runs. The buyers should know about the fabric properties, pricing information, availability, delivery prices and delivery times.

It is the buyer's responsibility to work out how much yardage is needed, both for duplicate cutting and for stock. The later stock yardage is based on past sales or careful prediction of future sales. Manufacturers are encouraged by textile salespeople to make a commitment to buying a specific amount of yardage early in the season. Availability and on-time delivery of particularly popular fabrics are guaranteed, if manufacturers order in advance. Seven to eight weeks' lead time for delivery is the usual time needed for volume orders. In some cases, very popular fashion fabrics and yarn dyes need as much as a six months lead time. Calculating how much fabric may be needed for possible re-orders is something the manufacturer must do. This is important because there is not enough time after re-orders have arrived to wait for another fabric shipment.

There is, however, a risk associated with stocking up for anticipated orders - if they do not materialise. This is why careful prediction is imperative. In order to eliminate some of the risk, manufacturers can choose to commit to "greige" (colour mix between grey and beige) goods which can be dyed later. When more precise sales information becomes available, colours can be chosen.

Trimmings

The trimmings and findings, which are materials used to finish garments or fashion accessories, are bought by the fabric buyer or sometimes a separate buyer. Findings are described as functional and include things such as zips, thread, braids, laces, and belts. Trimmings should have the same care properties as the fabrics used to make the specific garments. This is so that they can all be washed safely together. The trimmings and findings must be inspected carefully and sorted after they arrive. The fabrics must also be inspected and sorted. The buyer is responsible for purchasing labels, hangers, hang tags and plastic bags.

Piece Goods Inspection

The fabrics must be carefully counted when they arrive at the factory, in order to ensure the entire order has been received. In large factories, there is a special piece of equipment that automatically counts the

fabric yardage as it rolls from one bolt to another. After it is counted, it is pulled over big viewing tables by large rollers. This is where it can be checked for any flaws. This would include things like shading or holes. If there are any present, they will be marked with coloured threads or 'flags' on the side of the fabric. This way, they can be avoided when cutting. If it is the case that there are too many flaws detected, the fabric will be sent back to the mill for a refund. If the manufacturer does not wish to have to inspect fabrics, they can pay the mill a premium to do it for them.

Certain companies have built good reputations for their product reliability. They will offer washing, dry cleaning, steaming and pressing tests, in order to ensure fabric durability, tensile strength, colour cracking and fastness, and also shrinkage. They may also test the durability of fabrics during sewing. This includes if the needles pull it or if the edges fray unreasonably. They also test that the colours in co-ordinates match. It is necessary that the tops and bottoms of outfits are cut from the same dye lot, in order to avoid even the slightest difference in shade. At the very least, shipments to the same stores should be within acceptable variations of colour, if they come from other dye lots.

Production Scheduling

The person working as head of production is responsible for making a production schedule or issue plan. This is to ensure that delivery dates are met. This is a schedule that generally covers six months and is a reverse timetable. The first date will be a shipping date, which should meet the retail store's order requirements. The schedule actually moves backwards and includes completion dates and cutting dates, etc.

Planning and Direction

When a store plans its promotions, it is necessary to clearly identify which group (or groups) or consumers it wants to reach. This group (or groups) is called their *target market*. The store must also identify what fashion image it wishes to project. In an ideal situation, a store will establish its policy regarding what image it wants to be known for, what its target market is, and then promote this to its customers. Stores will often update their fashion image and what they want to promote in accordance with any changes in fashion style, or even in their specific neighbourhoods.

Sales and promotions are integral parts of the yearly merchandising plan. Stores will schedule traditional activities throughout the retail calendar, as well as promoting the six possible fashion seasons; these being spring, summer, holiday, resort, transitional and autumn (or fall). Bridal fashion shows are also part of the calendar activities, as are January and August white sales (towels, sheets and linen), back-to-school sales and special features for Christmas and certain other holidays.

In smaller stores, it is usually one person who is responsible for handling all the promotional activities - often with the assistance of outside agencies or consultants. In bigger stores, there are sales promotion managers who jointly co-ordinate the advertising, displays, public relations, special events and the fashion office. The sales promotion manager/director is the one who will set the goals and begin to make general plans. He/she will meet with other directors of each promotional area and the buyers, and together they will decide what exactly to promote, when to do it and how they will reach their target

market.

Fashion Advertising

Advertising is the use of paid space or time in media to promote a particular product or event. This would include mediums such as radio, television, internet, newspapers, billboards and direct mail. In retail stores, it is the advertising which is usually allocated the largest part of the sales budget. This would be approximately 1% to 3% of sales. A large portion of the advertising budget will often go to newspaper space. In order to attract a customer's attention to a particular event or product, there will be a huge amount of planning, designing, writing and scheduling of paid announcements.

Types of Advertising

There are basically two types of advertising used by stores: selling of a particular image or selling of a particular item. To attract attention to the store itself rather than the product, institutional or prestige advertising is used. The fashion image, fashion leadership, community goodwill, the opening of a new store or a special event is the focus with this type of advertising. The most effective type of advertising is that which is catered to the *customer's point of view*. When it comes to fashion advertising, the focus is on ensuring the customers can picture how attractive they will look while wearing the items advertised. One aspect must be adhered to however, which is that advertising has to be truthful. This way, the company will be able to build customer confidence and a strong reputation for the store or manufacturer.

Scheduling and Planning

Usually, promotional events and advertising are scheduled in advance, up to six months ahead of the selling season in some cases. As with all sales and marketing strategies, advertising plans are centred around past experiences, present conditions, and future predictions or expectations. The advertising plans are used as guides for particular periods, perhaps a week, quarterly or even a season. The plans must also include the amount of advertising the store anticipates it will do in that particular period, in order to attract customers.

Once the initial plans are organised, a budget must be arranged detailing exactly how much money will be assigned for advertising. Any time or space allocated to newspapers or television must be contracted and a timetable developed, specifying how the advertising production is to be done and by whom. This all needs to be sorted efficiently, in order to ensure media deadlines are met.

Media

If fashion advertising is not noticed, it will not be successful. The primary message has to be delivered to the target market in an effective way, and this means it must be noticed. Because of this, it is necessary to choose the most effective medium - the one that will best promote an event or reach the target audience. Fashion advertising is mostly visual, so this must be kept in mind when deciding on the best medium for the job. Every consumer group has its own individual interests, tastes and ideas, and therefore will respond differently to different media.

To strengthen the advertising campaign, many ads are placed in different media outlets in order to support each other. For example, a spot radio commercial aimed at car users might be placed alongside an ad in the newspaper, for train and bus commuters to also read. Advertising works well with repetition as it helps to retain public interest. Along with repetition, consistency is just as important. Placing the same ad on the same page in the newspaper every week, as well as the same ad read out on radio at the same time every day, will ensure people become very aware of the brand name or the store, and the fashion message it is aiming to promote.

Newspaper Advertising

Fashion retailers tend to advertise in newspapers quite often. There are several reasons for this:

1. It provides a visual means of promoting merchandise to customers, clearly showing what's on offer from the company.
2. The art or layout is relatively easy to produce.
3. It can be offered on a daily basis, which is essential in the rapidly-changing fashion business.
4. The cost of this type of media advertising is quite low, compared to other types.

Space is bought in newspapers by the retailer in order to reach its target market and new potential customers. The company's messages are displayed to readers in certain geographic areas or trade groups, day after day. Sometimes, a certain desirable position in the paper can be bought by the retailer. They may even (and often do) pay premium prices to have their ads appear in the same place every day, building consistency and repetition.

Magazine Advertising

In order to take advantage of national circulation, large retailers often advertise in fashion magazines. These magazines also have regional editions that feature inserted pages of local store advertising.

Radio and Television Advertising

Fashion advertising is increasingly being seen in television commercials. This type of advertising is able to show potential consumers how the clothing might fit in a real-life situation. The only real downside to TV advertising is that airtime and production are both quite expensive. The cost can vary somewhat, depending on the length of the ad and the time of day it will be shown. Prime-time, which is between 7 and 11 PM, is the most expensive, as it is when the largest numbers of adults watch television. Local TV stations can often be less expensive. These types of ads are made under the direction of the retailer.

Radio advertising is a good way to ensure listeners become aware of the brand name and store locations. Radio also has prime-time listening just like TV. These would be during 'drive time' or the rush hours, when most people are going to and/or from work and are in their cars, listening to the radio. Stations should be chosen for their target markets. For example, professionals will most likely be reached during rush hour times. During rock music programme would be better for reaching teens, while other spots might target mums (or dads) at specific times doing school runs.

Direct-Mail Advertising

Another highly effective method of advertising is direct mailing. It is a little more personal as it is usually addressed to potential customers - the recipients often being actual/past customers. Specific catalogues are mailed to target audiences, such as cosmetics buyers, larger-sized customers, etc. In many instances, direct mail includes the catalogues, as well as statements provided by manufacturers and monthly billings to customers with outstanding balances owed. An extremely popular way of advertising is mail-order catalogues. These allow for extremely convenient shopping, especially for busy professionals.

Co-operative Advertising

Fibre producers and manufacturers often co-operate financially regarding advertisements with the retailers who feature their merchandise. Co-op allocations are built around a certain percentage of net sales to the retailer. Sometimes, they provide up to 50% of the media costs. In-house advertising departments are a feature of most large retail stores. The advertising director is responsible for three divisions: art, copy and production.

Art

The art division of the department deals with the *layouts* - the sketches that detail how the ads will look. The final drawings are done by the art department, freelance artists or sometimes photographers who take the pictures to be used. Photography adds a more realistic quality to the advertising, whether it is promotional or direct-sell. Institutional advertisements are better-served by illustrations.

Copy

The textual descriptions in the advertisements are produced by the copywriters. A talented copywriter is able to imagine the person(s) reading the ads and will come up with the exact words and phrasing that speak directly to him/her. High-fashion copy and sales copy are different, in that high-fashion highlights glamour.

Production

The production department brings together all parts of the advertisement in a mechanical arrangement, according to the layout. The mechanical technician's job is to ensure that the completed ad matches the original idea and layout. The production division also handles *traffic*, i.e., how the artwork and copy will flow among the store, printers, engravers, photographers, newspapers, radio, and TV stations.

Advertising Agencies

In some cases, an outside agency is hired to create advertisements and images for stores that do not have an in-house advertising department. These agencies also produce radio and TV ads for stores which are only able to produce their own newspaper ads. In most cases, the agency is paid a monthly retainer fee, or a commission which is calculated in accordance with time and the space bought in magazines, newspapers, radio and television.

Publicity

Publicity is the promotion and exposure of information regarding people, special events and certain newsworthy topics through various forms of communications media. In the fashion industry, publicity aids in promoting the sale of fashion products by making the public more aware of a particular manufacturer, retailer, style, trend or other fashion aspect. Media editors opt for material they feel will be of interest to the community. The how, when, and where of the message is determined by the media.

Getting Publicity

By calling attention to newsworthy developments in their stores, retailers aspire to bring their names to the public's attention. Events such as fashion shows or celebrity appearances are events that retailers use to gain even more publicity. The stores will usually release a written statement to all the media outlets, containing information which may include important facts about a person, place or upcoming event. This statement is often sent with glossy photographs. A lot of photos and press releases are supplied by merchandise vendors. The media will receive the publicity material either from the public relations office or the fashion office, depending on which one is more concerned with the particular event or topic.

Media that Give Publicity

Retailers send publicity material to media outlets with the audiences that will be most interested in their message. This way, they can achieve the maximum benefit. The goal is to get publicity in both broadcast and print media, so that a larger audience is guaranteed. Publicity photos and information with which to write articles is used by newspaper fashion editors.

Special Events

In order to bring existing and new customers alike to a store or to create goodwill, special events are planned by the retailers. Special events in particular, which appeal to the interests of the public especially, encourage recreational shopping as a leisure activity. In these times, so much personal customer contact time has been lost in many of the larger stores. Special events are a way of replacing this lost contact in an attempt to create community spirit and a sense of loyalty to the stores.

Fashion Shows

To communicate a fashion story, it is a good idea to hold a fashion show. There are basically two types: formal and informal.

The Formal or Runway Show

This type of show requires a huge amount of planning which includes booking models, fittings, organising the runway, any scenery that may be needed, music, lighting, seating etc. With formal or runway shows, it is necessary to hold rehearsals, as they have a theatrical aspect to them which requires everyone to

know exactly where to be and what to do at the right time. As these types of shows usually attract large audiences, advance publicity and advertising has to be done in a very effective way. Depending on whether the fashion show is for sales or goodwill (charity), it will be done either in-store so people can buy immediately, or in an outside venue to promote the charity or other goodwill event. Fashion shows are planned and prepared by the fashion office or the special events office, and in some cases both offices together.

The informal show

An informal type of show is much easier to produce. It can also be very effective in a more personal way. The concept behind it is that customers will get personal contact with models who walk around the store, or lunch in the store's restaurant wearing fashions they are displaying and sell. The customers are able to speak directly with the models, ask questions and enjoy their time without any pressure or formalities.

The Fashion Office

Every store has a slightly different function for their fashion offices. With chain or group stores, the fashion office is led by a fashion director. This person is in charge of setting the fashion image for the store. In smaller stores or branch stores, there is usually a fashion co-ordinator who heads the fashion office. Both the director and co-ordinator are responsible for the production of fashion shows, working with the displays, promotion, advertising and organisation of special events.

Visual Presentation

One of the most effective ways of communicating the store image and/or fashion ideas to customers is through visual presentations or displays of merchandise. Display artists will decorate the store's windows and design the interior displays of merchandise. This is a very important job, as a well thought-out and attention-grabbing window display will entice shoppers to enter the store and look around. Once inside the store, potential customers are further exposed to fashion merchandise and additional purchase suggestions through the interior displays.

Window Displays

As mentioned above, a well-presented display in a window is important and is an art form in itself. These displays are created with the actual merchandise and other props. The display artists will employ the same aspects to their work as good garment designers. The windows can set a particular mood, convey a fashion message and directly sell the store's merchandise. The garments and accessories displayed are usually the most dramatic and fashionable of those available at the time.

Mood Windows

In order to communicate the spirit of a particular holiday season, mood windows are created. Instead of directly publicising purchases, they push a certain idea of gift giving or decorating for holidays such as Christmas, for example.

Fashion Message Windows

This type of advertising is a way of displaying the newest fashion trends and suggesting ways in which accessories can be co-ordinated for the newest styles. The intention with these windows is to attract consumers' attention and entice them to buy new garments or accessories.

Direct-Sell Windows

These windows are intended to do what the title implies – sell directly. They are used by stores that carry and sell popularly priced merchandise. The direct-sell window display will show a representative assortment of the store's merchandise as well as their pricing, thus tempting customers with the possibility of a bargain.

Interior Displays

The interior displays have a dual-purpose: general and more specific. The general display is intended to relate generally to the surrounding area. The more specific display is intended to tempt the buyer to purchase specific items. The displays might enlarge on a window theme or highlight interesting merchandise from within the department. These displays might come in the form of *vignettes (lifestyle displays)* which can include mannequins posing in particular scenes and dressed appropriately, or *single items* which are displayed on a stand. The Japanese trend, which is minimalist, is driving new and exciting approaches to visual presentations. With the emergence of this trend, new fixtures on which to display merchandise have emerged.

Evaluation

An evaluation takes place at the end of a promotional or advertising event, so as to assess the effectiveness of the campaign. Advertising is assessed by sales volume, but it is more difficult to assess sales results with regards to special events or displays. For this reason, special events are often on the receiving end of budget-cuts. Management must evaluate the effectiveness of a campaign and then make recommendations for the coming year.

Mail-Order Retailing

Many people like the convenience of mail order buying as it is easier than spending time fighting through traffic and crowds to search stores for the perfect gifts. In particular, working women find it much easier to shop from catalogues at home and have merchandise delivered. Even though catalogues can be expensive to prepare and distribute, it is much cheaper than paying overheads for more stores and wages for sales staff.

Online orders

Another increasingly popular way of shopping these days is online through the internet. People are generally very busy and this gives them another easy way of getting their shopping done and delivered directly to them. This kind of shopping and retailing is cost-effective for both buyers and fashion designers, in particular those designers who are just starting their businesses and have no physical store, and thus no need to pay rent or hire sales staff. People can also place orders over the phone.

The online fashion store is a great idea for starting fashion businesses, or for those who have a very small budget to work with. Before beginning an online store, however, designers must identify exactly what products they will sell. Often, the focus is on a specific niche and target demographic. The designers must also determine if the merchandise will be upmarket, high fashion, casual or every day wear, uniforms, athletic gear, baby clothes, what ages they are targeting and also at what income level. For example, will the target market be wealthier consumers, or those with more modest incomes? There is a near-infinite range of possibilities to choose from.

Category Distinctions

Distinctions among the many kinds of retail stores are beginning to disappear. An example of this is mail order businesses, which can now operate out of department stores and vice-versa. Department stores are opening up boutiques or specialty divisions within their shops. In some cases, discount stores are attempting to 'trade up' and carry higher-end merchandise. Among them exists an overlap of price points. For this reason, categorising retail stores has become more complex. This breakdown of distinctions can sometimes be precarious for stores that move out of their primary price or product assortment niches.

Customer Services

Increasingly, stores are offering additional customer services, such as no-questions-asked returns, fashion consulting, interest-free credit plans, free local deliveries and gift wrapping. More services are being offered than ever before, but a big problem is that quite often the actual *in-store* service quality is lacking. Salespeople may be unavailable or not very knowledgeable about stock. They may not offer overseas mailing (as they do in most of Europe), or customers may have to wait in long lines to get their purchases gift-wrapped. Something beneficial more stores could do is begin developing more of a personal approach towards customer service. Ideas for this could include offering multilingual aids for foreigners who live in or are visiting the UK, for example. Since shopping has become very much a leisure activity, many suburban residential stores have longer opening hours, including on weekends, for customer convenience.

Leased Departments

Many stores lease some of their departments to outside organisations as a way of providing additional services for their customers. Leased departments in retail stores are now often merchandised, owned

and operated by outside firms instead of the store itself. The leased services generally include hairdressing salons, restaurants, shoe and jewellery repairs etc. Fur, millinery, shoes and fine jewellery departments are also leased.

The Store Image

Stores have to determine who their potential target customers are and how to reach them. Store management must identify the type of people who live in the community, their lifestyles and, of course, their shopping needs and wants. This has to be done whether a new store is being set up or an existing one is being re-evaluated. The aim is to determine *how* to fill the customers' needs and wants.

Target Customers

In order to reach potential customers, it is necessary to first determine exactly who they are or should be. The target customers are the group or groups of people the store wants to attract. A retail store can have more than one target market, but it cannot be all things to all people, therefore it must choose either one or a few groups to serve. The target market group(s) usually has similar lifestyles, tastes and are within a general age range. Using the fashion cycle stages, the target group's tastes can be determined and also whether or not they are fashion leaders or followers. Usually, stores will have separate departments to cater to the needs and preferences of several groups. Examples of this would be women's wear, which would be divided into designer, contemporary and junior.

Defining the Store's Image

Having a very clearly-defined image is of utmost importance for every store. It must create and develop a particular character or personality that it wishes to present to consumers. The *fashion image* of a store is the quality of fashion leadership it strives to provide. Everything within the store must reflect this image, from the interior design to the customer service provided. The aim is to create an experience for the customers, which includes a complementary background for its merchandise and a welcoming environment. There are many people who work to achieve the desired image. These people include interior designers, architects, display personnel etc. Their full-time jobs are geared towards creating excitement about the store's merchandise and therefore influencing people to buy. A boutique store is already small and therefore has a cosiness of atmosphere. Larger stores must use the boutique concept or store-within-a-store concept, to create the feel of an individual shop, with atmosphere and décor suitable to its particular merchandise.

Degree of Fashion Leadership

Stores must decide what role they want to play in fashion leadership, as well as ensuring they match the merchandising policy with their image and target markets. There are three main categories which define store fashion leadership. These loosely defined categories are:

1. Stores which already have a strong fashion image try to keep their leadership status by making sure they carry the latest fashions. The customers of these stores are usually fashion leaders -

people who adopt the newest styles at the beginning of the fashion cycles.

2. Stores which attempt to compete with promotional stores on prices in some areas. Promotional stores are those that are able to charge lower prices due to low overheads.
3. Mass merchants who only offer fashion merchandise of proven styles because they appeal to fashion followers. These types of customers purchase only styles they are used to seeing on others. A fashion style reaches these stores later than the others, because it takes the mass producers some time to reproduce them at lower prices.

Once fashion has reached its peak level, it all starts to look the same - everyone is copying everyone else. Sears is a good example of a mass merchant.

Selling

The Role of a Sales Representative

Sales representatives are the people who sell manufactured goods to retail buyers. Their job is to successfully communicate a fashion concept to buyers, even if a line has a proven record of being merchandised and designed successfully. Larger companies hire sales staff to do this. However, smaller, independent stores use independent representatives who carry one or even more non-competing lines. These independent reps are normally paid on a commission basis which averages around 7%, the highest level is usually 10%. The commission is paid on orders that have been shipped and accepted by the retail stores.

The way it usually works is the rep will organise a presentation in a central hotel. Buyers from the area will come and check out the line(s). Representatives from manufacturers do not often visit each store personally because of time constraints. However, they may come to the hotels in order to win new accounts. Apparel salespeople must have a strong understanding of the industry they are in, the products they promote, the marketing, the economy and of course, the needs of retail stores both large and small. Establishing suitable contacts and target customer followings is another part of their job. Salesperson will give recommendations to retailers about when and how much of a line they should buy, using the store's customer base and image as a basis to work from. For the purposes of product control, sales reps can provide valuable information about retail needs and line evaluation to the manufacturers.

Computerization

The extensive use of computers has been one of the most important innovations in the sale and distribution of fashion merchandise. The computer can be used for the planning, monitoring and recapping of a selling season. **Planning** a season involves using spreadsheets displaying what must be produced and sold per month, in order to achieve sales and profit targets. Using the computer for this process can take only about three or four hours, as opposed to three or four days for the manual approach. The computer gives sales managers and merchandisers extra time to experiment with other's plans. The use of a computer for **monitoring** a season is also ideal, as a computer can easily keep records of inventory, sales and customer service information. Inventory of ordered fabrics, issued cuts, garments currently in production and finished garments in stock can all be available at the touch of a button.

Computers are also useful for keeping track of shipments and making adjustments to inventory records.

It is the computer's information that immediately lets the sales reps know what is available and what the expected delivery dates are. Invoices are printed on computers, re-orders are made and pre-marking for retailers can also be done.

Recapping occurs at the end of a season - this is when merchandisers and sales managers will use the computer records to compare the *actual* sales figures with the original plan. This will tell them if their goals have been achieved. The records also provide other important information for merchandisers and designers such as the styles, colours, fabrics, and price ranges which sold best. Armed with all this information, merchandisers are able to plan future lines.

Quality Control

In the past, quality control was usually the final inspection of merchandise. In some instances, there was some 'in process' inspection, but this did not always occur. Total Quality Control is the process which focuses on creating an awareness of quality achievement throughout the entire business. This includes inspection routines, but in particular it involves making sure everyone involved understands that their contribution influences the quality of a finished project.

Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance refers to the maintenance of quality. There are, however, two generic uses of 'quality assurance' which are:

1. Paying attention to issues which arise from garment production, instead of any issues which arise from the original design or the design of the production process. It is the inspectors, not the designers or production staff, who have the ultimate responsibility here. The clothing industry commonly uses this system. Regular changes in design occur, in particular in women's fashion, and faults are returned to machinists or deductions are made from payments. This, of course, reduces motivation.
2. Manufacturing quality into garment manufacturing. This can be applied in three ways. Firstly, any defects that are found are traced back to the production process and when the causes are identified, they are eliminated. Secondly, the 'Total Quality Control' aspect is used whereby sustained quality performance involves every relevant area of the company and its suppliers. Thirdly, company-wide quality control entails a commitment from all departments, not only in production, and involves methods like quality circles.

Study of Customer Requirements

In the clothing industry, customer requirements must meet the dictates of fashion. Companies must explicitly define what garment properties can be expected in their price range.

Satisfactory Design of the Garment

Designing must always take into account the aspect of fit. Bespoke garments are cut to fit individuals, in cases where all their measurements and characteristics are known before the actual manufacturing starts. The opposite of this is the ready-to-wear garments. In those cases, the garments are cut to fit groups of people. Of course, their measurements and figure characteristics are not known, but an educated estimate is made before manufacturing. With ready-to-wear garments, the fit should be close enough to satisfy customers' needs.

Concepts of fit are often different, depending on the garments. For example, a nightdress should be somewhat loose, but for jeans a tighter fit is required. In order to satisfy customers, a range of sizes must be cut, and because of this, manufacturers must have a good understanding of the national system of size coding. They must also determine what body measurements will be represented by the coding of their garments and any additions that need to be made to body measurements, in order to ensure the clothes are comfortable. Allowances for style features must also be considered.

The method of assembly is another decision that must be made, in order to ensure the satisfactory design of garments. It is the designer's job to opt for the best seam and stitch type – those that will deliver the best combination of strength, elasticity, durability and of course, aesthetics.

User Experience and Feedback

Generally, companies will be respectful of customer complaints and will usually reimburse them with no questions asked. Because of this, the manufacturing department must make serious efforts to discover the cause of any defects which have led to a complaint. The thinking goes something like this: one customer's complaint often represents the many customers who did *not* complain and may take their business elsewhere. So, the cycle of quality control goes right back to its starting point, ie. studying customers' requirements. Complaints from customers are of utmost importance, because they tell the manufacturers something about the quality of their garments and whether or not their quality assurance operations actually work.

There are many reasons why customers complain. However, one common cause is the breaking of a factory routine or habit. Rarely will there be a complaint such as missing buttons. This is usually a garment that has been rectified on the line and then becomes late for delivery, is repressed quickly and sent on before buttons could be replaced. Sometimes, customers' complaints may be unjustified (and even fraudulent) regarding what can be reasonably expected of a garment. This is why a competent quality assurance operation is necessary, in order to divide the justified from the unjustified and subsequently send the information back to the design, manufacturing and inspection systems. A fully implemented quality assurance scheme is ideal.

The Designer and Quality Control

A key role is played by the designer in achieving quality targets. Two definitions must be kept in mind:

- 1) The quality of a design refers to the inherent value in a garment and also the functional and perceived value of the materials. Examples would be silk versus polyester, wool versus polyester, viscose, real mother-of-pearl and horn buttons etc. Other things to consider are the amount of content, lined versus unlined skirts, how many pockets there are in a suit, and taped hems versus overlapped hems.
- 2) The quality of design is a mix of aesthetics, price, performance, and appropriateness to individual customers. A good balance of all these things is what a great design entails. Quality of conformity means it is vital that this quality is kept in the individual garments produced compared to the original design.

All aspects of quality design are the responsibility of the designer. It is up to the designer to determine the value of their garments. The costs of fabric, trims, and work content tend to increase quicker than achieving value in the garment. The company will increase the price as the value increases. In a company's range of options, there is a maximum profit. Below this point, less of a profit comes from the company charging a lower price. Above this point, lower points come from the higher costs involved.

The designer has other responsibilities aside from quality in the area of conformity. Their garments have to be as easy as possible to duplicate within the requirements of the particular style. Those in the fashion industry do not like the word 'standardisation' however, there are ways to categorise the variety. Certain relationships can be standardised within the design, for example. The edge of a fusible interlining and the outer fabric's edge can be standardised to be the same wherever possible. Notches on seams can be made and found in the same part of the seam. Machine operators can usually get into a habit and get things like these correct every time. Ensuring the two piles of a seam have equal profiles should be done wherever possible. It is easier to sew this rather than join a round edge to a straight edge or even opposite curves. In some cases, as in princess dresses, opposite curves are, at times, unavoidable.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *The Fashion Designer Survival Guide: Start and Run Your Own Fashion Business by Mary Gehlhar and Christian Siriano | Jan 5, 2021*
- ✓ *The Way We Wed: A Global History of Wedding Fashion by Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell | Dec 1, 2020*