

Technology initiatives

by Jamie Swedberg, Contributing Author

Collaboration Can Speed Fashion Cycle

Apparel companies such as Elie Tahari are collaborating more with their manufacturers, Could the next frontier be sharing design and product development details with retailers?

They say nothing is certain except death and taxes. But let's face it: You can count on supply chain bottlenecks, too.

Some are inevitable. For example, there's really no practical way to make container ships travel faster or to magically spirit cargo quickly through customs.

But many other parts of the apparel design, manufacturing and distribution process can be improved. Most bottlenecks in these areas have to do with communication — very simply, everybody having access to information when and where it's needed.

With that in mind, more apparel companies are finding ways to collaborate with suppliers and retailers to vanquish unnecessary delays and costs.

Goodbye to the black holes

When you're designing clothing, fitting sessions — and the inevitable revisions — slow down the process. Meanwhile, fabric inventories and quality control require constant monitoring.

"Our view is that four months is the minimum [to design, manufacture and ship new apparel]," says Emmanuel Weintraub, president and CEO of Emmanuel Weintraub Associates, a Fort Lee, NJ, consulting firm. "That's not great, but it's what you should at least strive for. To do that, you have to look at the lines of communication, the chains of command, the use of technology and the work processes you're using."

A little more than a year ago New York City-based Elie Tahari did just that. The fashion firm began using Business Management Systems'

(BMS) Web-enabled Vertex software to collaborate with the factories that produce its clothing lines.

"We're using it in technical design, sending [the factories] the tech packs so they can get better information on what we're looking for," says Jason Epstein, Elie Tahari's chief technology officer.

The software enables the company to transmit clearer directions for manufacturers, but it also clarifies things for Elie Tahari designers, he says, in that production and import tracking functionality allows the firm to keep tabs on production stages. "Before, it was sort of a black [hole in terms of] what was going on with all the styles we were having the factories produce," Epstein says.

The software's fabric and trim inventory management functions also allow Elie Tahari to see raw material stock levels and locations. "It was always a challenge to manage what fabric we had out at the different factories," Epstein says. "It would take us a lot of time and manual labor to maintain an accurate fabric and trim inventory at our factories. By getting the factories to help us maintain our inventories, we are experiencing a huge cost savings."

Weintraub says apparel firms often must carry a certain size and clout to convince overseas factories to buy into the use of such collaborative software programs. To that end, Epstein says Elie Tahari is still ironing out some of the implementations in Asia.

"We're still getting all the factories up and running on it," Epstein says. "But one key fac-

tor is being able to show them how it is going to benefit them — that they'll be able to get all the information they need from us in a database rather than having to chase our people around. They'll know all the details of what they are producing. There's a lot of benefit for them as well."

Scott Oldham, manager of business development at BMS, notes that the software firm is looking to provide companies such as Elie Tahari with a way to enable their offshore vendors to view 3-D garment mock-ups for counter sample development. "They'll be able to hone in on things that have to be corrected, [such as] changing out a zipper, moving a pocket or whatever," Oldham says. "There will be a significant amount of time saved in the sample-making process, and the level of accuracy will really increase."

Forging a link

Earlier this year, Hong Kong-based shirt maker TAL Apparel Ltd. made headlines for the very sophisticated manner in which it collaborates with its retail customers. For example, TAL tracks and manages JCPenney's inventory of TAL-made shirts in real time. This type of inventory tracking and warehouse management is standard operating procedure for consumer packaged goods firms, but it's relatively new to the apparel business.

Epstein says the TAL-JCPenney replenishment model wouldn't benefit his company quite as much as it does those companies because Elie Tahari releases new styles monthly. But occasionally Elie Tahari does use sales intelligence to steer its manufacturing. "We have weekly best-



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JASON EPSTEIN, Chief Technology Officer, Elie Tahari

seller meetings," Epstein says. "Elie sees that something is really hot, and then there is an opportunity to recut it and chase it."

Meanwhile, Elie Tahari also is installing warehouse management software from Manhattan Associates to streamline its distribution. "The minute we receive [an item], we'll see the inventory right away in our systems," Epstein says. "Anytime something scans, we'll know what part of the process each style is in, from receiving to shipping. So it's going to give our salespeople a lot more manageability over the process and make sure that they are meeting our customers' expectations."

With systems like these, apparel makers are growing closer relationships with the retail end of the supply chain. These types of collaborative relationships are more common in non-apparel markets, but Russ Henry, senior vice president of marketing at Velosel Corp., says he would like to see that change.

Santa Clara, CA-based Velosel offers software to help design and manufacturing firms organize the data they send to retailers. The information can be shared via online data pools. One goal of this linkage is to give designers more control of

the in-store merchandising process. In so doing, the system also makes pertinent product information more readily available to the retailer. That means the product may hit the shelf more quickly, and may potentially sell faster.

For instance, if a store needs to know product dimensions to decide how to place a shipment on the selling floor, the retailer can ask the apparel vendor to provide that information digitally, eliminating data entry for the retailer.

"There's a superset of information beyond the UPC code," Henry explains. "It can be anything from dimensions to colors to associated products. If it's technical apparel, like outerwear, it could be details about the performance of the fabric. Retailers want to know the up-sale and cross-sale relationships so they can better manage their assortments, and manufacturers want to share that information."

This type of data synchronization helps retailers become more effective, and it also significantly reduces the number of bad orders, Henry says. "The whole idea is that the retailer can more effectively merchandise the product," he says. "It also works with companion Web stores, promotional pieces and other areas."

As apparel companies evolve in their collaboration with factories and raw materials suppliers, the type of collaboration Henry describes may present another frontier. If apparel vendors can use the information that's already in their PDM systems to meet the merchandising needs of retailers, they'll be able to coordinate efforts all the way from the initial sketch to the final sale. Details from the designer's desk could be used to both assure quality at factories and create store displays at retail.

And in the end, that will mean bringing designs to market more quickly, and for less money.

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Resource list

To access ReaderLink visit apparelmag.com.

Business Management Systems (BMS)

201-703-8956 • ReaderLink #69

Emmanuel Weintraub Associates
201-947-2402 • ReaderLink #70

Manhattan Associates 770-955-7070 • ReaderLink #71

Velosel Corp.

408-850-2100 • ReaderLink #72

This list does not represent all suppliers in this area, just those mentioned in this article.

...from Concept			through Development			to Delivery...											
• Business Planning	• Raw Materials Planning	• Images and Sketches	• Initial Line Planning	• Swatch Cards	• Doll Sheets	• Fabrics, Yarns and Trims	• Preliminary Styles	• Technical Specifications	• Samples and Fittings	• Bills of Materials	• Preliminary Costing	• Bulk RM Orders	• Cut Orders	• Pre-Pro Samples	• Calendar Mgmt.	• Product Catalogs	• Actual Costing
Vertex						Apparel Software Solutions			33-00 Broadway Suite 308 Fair Lawn, NJ 07410 (800) 266-4046 mail@bmsystems.com www.bmsystems.com			BMS Business Management Systems, Inc					
Technology That Fits																	