

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-

