

# Wilhelm: Integration Essential for Faster Cycle Time

by Julia Fein Azoulay, Special to Bobbin

**V**olume has grown, delivery time frames have shrunk, consumer demands and expectations have risen and pressure has increased exponentially; nevertheless, many apparel businesses have been slow to adopt product development technology. That, according to technology consultant Walter Wilhelm, is a grave mistake: Faster, cheaper and better is still the rule, he pointed out at a recent seminar on product data management (PDM) technology hosted by Business Management Systems Inc. (BMS) in New York.

In today's business climate, however, two out of three isn't enough, he emphasized, and the greatest obstacles to meeting all three standards arise during the product development phase. "The front end provides the direction, the steering and most often, the power for the company," Wilhelm urged the audience. "Today's business environment is slippery. If you don't have strong front-end alignment, the back-end results are jeopardized."

Attended by such firms as Tahari, Theory and Ellen Tracy, the seminar featured an overview of the BMS PDM system, Vertex Apparel Software.

Throughout the event, certain themes became clear. For one, integrated PDM solutions can dramatically impact the bottom line because:

- complete, detailed and accurate product information eliminates the margin of contractor error;
- the timely transmission of product information and raw materials reduces delivery deficits; and
- product specification accuracy increases product quality.

Another trend that surfaced at the seminar was the fact that many apparel operations are caught in an awkward state of semi-integration and technological inconsistencies. Design may be CAD-based, for example, but images are still printed out and hand-faxed; employees may be technologically fluent, but methods aren't standardized.

## How Ellen Tracy Streamlined Product Development

"PDM software has helped ensure the smooth flow of information between departments, helped us shrink our to-market lead time and quickened our organization's response time," reveals Andrew Megibow, vice president of operations, Ellen Tracy, which has finished its implementation of Business Management Systems' Vertex PDM solution. "It also forces us to standardize certain documents, processes and communications. That discipline creates a markedly more efficient process."

Conceding that "it's difficult to quantify the cost savings as a direct result of the product development software itself," Megibow says

he remains convinced that "it has streamlined our purchases, made us more organized and afforded us superb inventory control. We purchase on a timely basis and very close to our requirements now. We've been able to speed the process of collecting and analyzing the data that enables us to eliminate the waste from our purchasing. And we do estimate that we've achieved a 20 percent to 25 percent reduction in cycle time."

He estimates that implementing the BMS system took approximately one year — essentially because that is Ellen Tracy's overall product lifecycle time frame, and modifications were made as the company

flowed through each stage of the process. "We're always fine-tuning the process we originally envisioned, as we find new value to the data and new ways to analyze the data," Megibow notes, adding that "our ability to marry the sketch to the data has been of great value."

"The database is the hub of the wheel," he explains. "The information creates value throughout all aspects of our operation. For us, PDM is a very broad product. We don't limit it to the developmental area only: It services our entire organization."

— Julia Fein Azoulay

Information and data are entered too often — or not often enough. Ultimately, this state of semi-integration reflects a widespread reluctance to change.

The reasons for the reluctance are clear, Wilhelm noted. Neither the front-end creative team nor the owners and senior management want the discipline that automation imposes, middle management cannot afford to have line development interrupted for the three to six months it might take to learn a new system, and many companies still want PDM software solutions to offer a return on their technology investment within a year or less. Another reason is frustration with the lack of integrated systems on the market that address all aspects of product development.

Wilhelm observed that while the industry has spent billions of dollars automating manufacturing, distribution and other business processes, and islands of technology have begun to take hold in areas like pattern making, grading, marking, cutting and CAD-based design, there's still an awkward unevenness to technological integration. Despite the quick response pressure, Wilhelm revealed, average



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response time from concept to production still remains somewhere between 48 and 50 weeks.

Apparel brands know that needs to change. As Theory head of merchandising Wendy Waugh concluded: "We're in the process of implementing BMS for pre-production. It's a very effective database that will streamline our processes and create better communication between and within departments — and will make it easier for employees to be effective. It's easy to use, easy to read and understandable — and it's going to free up all the users to think and focus."

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Following is a resource list of suppliers mentioned in this article. Visit [bobbin.com](http://bobbin.com) to access ReaderLink.

#### Business Management Systems Inc. (BMS)

tel.: 201-703-8956, ReaderLink #75

#### Walter Wilhelm Associates LLC

tel.: 866-318-3568, ReaderLink #76

**Editor's Note:** For more providers of the types of solutions mentioned in this article, see the *Bobbin* Buyer's Guide 2002 in the March issue or online at [www.bobbin.com](http://www.bobbin.com).