Harmonizing Design, Development and the Supply Chain
WHAT IS PLM FOR FASHION?

Product Lifecycle Management is a far-reaching system that can serve a wide variety of functions for the many different roles involved in product development. By making the right information available to the right people at the right time, PLM lays the foundation for successful collaboration—which is key to maintaining a well-oiled product development process and making sound business decisions.
The fashion industry is changing at an incredible rate. Macro-economic and geo-political factors including a post-crisis hesitation to buy; high unemployment and under-employment; varying exchange rates; major elections and changes in economic policies; fluctuating costs of raw materials; and general instability are all making it difficult to read the present, much less make a decision about the future. At the same time, a host of disruptive technological changes, some new, some only now reaching maturity, are shaping the way fashion is made and consumed. The use of 3D for previewing garments before sampling and the profound effect the Internet has had on the way consumers make purchase decisions are two striking examples of technology’s potential to impact fashion at different ends of the product lifecycle.

**WHY A PLM FOR FASHION?**

**A UNIQUE BUSINESS, BUT A BUSINESS NONETHELESS**

In addition to the macro factors working to shape fashion, the industry itself presents particular challenges that generic tools aren’t necessarily suited to resolve. Fast trend turnover; a staggering number of SKUs; complex sizing and grading; geographically and culturally diverse supplier networks; fickle consumer behaviors; and unpredictable or inconvenient weather events are just some of the challenges unique to fashion.

Even though the business of fashion is different, general business needs still apply: getting teams to synchronize and communicate; making information available easily and when it needs to be; and integrating design and product development with the rest of the supply chain. Therefore, tools developed for fashion must cater to the industry’s idiosyncrasies, but still be compatible with standard business systems, such as CRM and ERP, to enable the pursuit of a seamless brand strategy.

**FIRST PROCESS, THEN TECHNOLOGY**

PLM is much more than a technology capable of centralizing and synchronizing information. It is an opportunity for a company to reexamine how things are done and to dig into process to understand what is needed to balance overlapping calendars, changing details, multiple approvals and re-submits on a daily basis. Establishing a process strong enough to bring these elements together coherently is fundamental, which is why finding a PLM provider that can provide process support and industry expertise as part of a long-term partnership is essential.
PLM’s potential to support brand management through technology and process change explains why, at many successful brands and retailers, it has evolved into a strategic investment made by the C-Suite and the Board. Beyond the obvious financial investment, PLM requires a commitment to process discipline, IT infrastructure and, most importantly, to supporting the people who will use the system. When implemented properly, PLM can transform process and support growth without additional headcount or overhead.

PLM as a management strategy for the fashion industry can facilitate everything from financials to finished product and keep everyone who touches a product on track, while providing traceability and visibility. In short, it can become the center of the wheel that keeps the product lifecycle rolling.

Let’s now take a look at how PLM for the Fashion industry can help solve current industry challenges and give adopters tangible advantages in the marketplace.
The rate at which the fashion industry is changing generates incredible uncertainty. This uncertainty drives many of the speed to market initiatives retailers and brands employ to get new product on the shelves quickly, minimize markdowns, and keep customers coming back. To overcome uncertainty, companies need control. With change constant and competition fierce, being able to “see” where all products are in development is a way to gain control. Without a complete vision, it’s impossible for departments to make the right style, quality, and budget decisions to keep teams on time and on target. A PLM developed for fashion gives companies much-needed visibility, flexibility, and clarity to control the product lifecycle and meet business objectives.

Getting information to the right people in time to make business decisions is one of the single biggest challenges for companies in the fashion industry due to the sheer diversity and complexity of products. Respecting scheduled deadlines and clearly defining each person’s role can be just as difficult for a luxury brand with a lean seasonal calendar as it is for a fast fashion retailer with back-to-back collections. When everyone involved in development is given a clear view of key milestones from the outset, however, it’s much easier to see when decisions must be made and by whom. An important advantage of across-the-board visibility is that changes can be made quickly. Defining product details early on also helps to estimate and control cost throughout the process. For example, with correct product data such as yardage and fabric quality requirements, production can be confident about material cost and raise an alert if products overstep budget boundaries before orders are launched. Perhaps a fabric needs to be replaced or a supplier is suddenly unavailable; whatever the issue, the department can ask the right questions and take action before events have a financial impact.

Another major challenge of collection development is managing the involvement of many people and departments with different priorities, almost always dispersed geographically. A process that incorporates visual methods of communication is likely to bring more clarity than one doesn’t—because whether you speak the same language or not, images are universal. Visual communication is not new to fashion; using it efficiently throughout the entire development process is. Images are typically used early on, in the form of sketches and tear sheets, but the use of pattern making and 3D prototyping software can extend the vision even deeper into development. For example, conceptualizing garments in a 3D virtual fitting room can help bridge the gap between designers and pattern makers. Equipping design and development teams with tools to visualize and share ideas, sketches, and fabrics...
with technically correct and clear 2D and 3D images, and housing them all on the same platform, is a good foundation for collaboration. Connecting patterns and measurements in a Fashion PLM also facilitates better control over fit by using block patterns, setting up grade rules specific to measurement points, and linking with 3D technology to give everyone a common vision of how garments will actually look.

**SHAPING UP FOR SOURCING**

The benefits of communicating visually don’t stop at design; a Fashion PLM has real potential to improve relations with suppliers, especially given the complexity of the fashion supply chain. This complexity is expressed in the shifts in manufacturing locations that complicate the effort to move faster, as the industry reacts to political instability, natural disasters, labor costs, logistics and changes in tariffs. Changing suppliers implies redefining relationships that could include new language barriers. And it takes time to teach factories what you want, both in terms of quality and fit. Also, fluctuations in cost or exchange rates can force last minute product changes and reduced adherence to calendars—factors we’ve seen a fashion-specific PLM can address.

**STAYING ON TRACK WITH SHARED INFORMATION**

A Fashion PLM makes it easier to keep track of suppliers and monitor compliance as well as key quality and cost metrics. Technical packs that contain clear and detailed information are more likely to result in a reduced number of modifications and back and forth exchanges. With PLM, all specifications, including product history, should be available in a few clicks. This makes it easy to carry over a style or resend a spec pack with a replenishment order. Suppliers can also be given limited access to the products they are producing to play a controlled yet interactive role in development.

If, for example, a technical pack is sent to a factory for sample production, a supplier with controlled access to PLM can check his/her measurements against the sender’s and enter comments or questions directly without having to send a package, write an email or wait until the next day to call. With everyone working on a single, shared file, suppliers know they have the latest information and companies can be sure what they communicate is accurate and up to date.

**PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE IS BARGAINING POWER**

Having easy access to detailed product information such as bills of material, images, construction and measurements can help determine costing throughout development, and facilitate comparison with previous products. Knowing the yield, style, and construction details makes this easier to calculate, which in turn can facilitate supplier negotiations for the sourcing team, especially when projected units, colors and delivery times are clearly specified: if, for example, multiple products call for the same or similar fabrics in the same shades, consolidating could decrease material cost. This is something a PLM for fashion should be able to do easily. Taking the time to streamline product communication—by integrating materials, suppliers, sketches, patterns, testing and more through a fashion-focused PLM system—ultimately frees up more time to put creative and business talent into added-value tasks.
WHERE DOES PLM END AND HOW DOES IT FIT WITH OTHER BUSINESS SYSTEMS AND TECHNOLOGY?

It’s commonly thought that PLM starts with a sketch and ends when a product and its components are “approved for production,” but this is an outdated view. Getting the most out of PLM in the fashion industry means starting earlier with budget and trends, following calendars through development, and then linking product information with other business systems. Additional data needed to analyze sales performance or make decisions about future products is often housed in these other systems. Very often, getting to this information requires export from multiple systems and further wrangling via a spreadsheet or two, but this needn’t be the case. Extending PLM by connecting and cross-referencing to other systems allows essential data to be housed in one place.

A PLM for Fashion that links to an ERP system, for example, allows a merchandising department to assess previous sales and build a collection plan for the upcoming season based on what sold through. They can use this information with visuals pulled from the PLM to build specific offers for different regions and better arm their sales force to deliver the brand.
ALIGNING THE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT TEAM WITH PLM

Defining the right technology fit for a company only accounts for half of the PLM equation; the other is guiding the people who use it to adopt a new process and get the most out of it.

PLM for Fashion is really about fostering connectivity across departments, so major goals will be to get the creative team communicating and following the same calendar as sourcing; to bring IT into the product world; and, ultimately to make sure the system is experienced as an asset by everyone using it. PLM needs to integrate seamlessly in order to work.

Just as a collection starts with silhouettes and shapes, it’s always easier to start a PLM project with the basics. Before suggesting any kind of PLM configuration, a PLM partner should carry out a business process analysis to determine what steps could be integrated, automated, or even eliminated with PLM. Once the core has been established, a plan for how and when to add new features should be integrated into the broader implementation plan, which may branch out to include other systems. This explains the importance of choosing a PLM partner that understands the fashion industry and has the expertise to maximize the return on your investment.

LECTRA FASHION PLM DEVELOPED FOR THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Building a fashion collection is a unique process. While technical details are important to consider when shopping for a PLM, finding a provider that knows the fashion industry and understands its nuances is just as critical.

For 40 years, Lectra has been helping fashion companies stay competitive in a changing industry, while protecting the fragile creative core that defines fashion.

Collaboration is key to effectively bridging collection development and the supply chain, which is why Lectra Fashion PLM integrates design and development technology onto a single platform, bringing the power of 3D into collection development to improve communication from design to production.
PLM FOR FASHION CHECKLIST:

- Natively integrates knit, weave, and print, sketch, and pattern design files held on a fashion platform.
- Automatically updates fabric and image file changes across a fashion platform.
- Natively integrates patterns, measurement charts and grading with 3D product development and visualization.
- Natively integrates storyboards, images, sketches with access to metadata.
- Print, knit and woven creation with fabrics natively integrated into the platform to fully control fabric and design properties.
- Combines top-down or bottom-up budgeting with line planning for product and material development.
- Visual dashboards and calendar with multiple viewing options.
- Differentiate currency, prices and multi-level SKU by channel.
- Includes flexible, multi-level bill of material costing with operations costs.
- Simplifies data table transfer through a spreadsheet upload tool.
- Has a fast 3 month "out-of-the-box, ready-for-fashion" implementation.
- Is scalable and modular to adapt to your business process.
- The provider understands the industry and invests heavily in R&D.
With 40 years’ experience in fashion and apparel, Lectra’s mission is to provide a complete spectrum of design, development, and production solutions to confront 21st-century challenges. From first creative spark to final product, our professional services address an end-to-end process. To learn how our offer for design, development, and production can help you benefit from collaboration, please contact one of our global offices.