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An Analysis of Apparel Industry Fit Sessions

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ABSTRACT

The fit session is the main point of evaluation for a garment during the product development process. This paper presents an analysis of the perceptions and practices of apparel industry professionals regarding best practices and areas for improvement for fit sessions. Participants from a large manufacturer of athletic apparel, including designers, merchandisers, product development managers, and pattern makers responded to a survey. Their responses suggest that fit sessions encompass product development decisions that extend beyond the fit of the garment to evaluation of design. Recommendations address the organization and communication of industry fit sessions with suggestions for using new technology to improve garment fit.

Keywords: fit, fit session, sizing, apparel

Introduction

Fit is an important criteria in a consumer's evaluation of an apparel product. According to Kurt Salmon Associates (Kurt Salmon Associates, 2000), 50 percent of women and 62 percent of men cannot find a good fit in apparel. Other studies have shown fit problems to be the reason for 50% of catalog returns (DesMarteau, 2000). With the wide variety of body shapes and sizes and a trend towards more fitted garments, fit problems continue to be an issue for apparel manufacturers and retailers, with no clear resolution.

Apparel manufacturers develop sample size garments for a specific target market and size range as part of the product development process. When an apparel company receives a sample garment, it is typically checked for compliance with specified garment measurements, fabric type, and construction details. It is critical, however, to also evaluate the garment on a live body to judge fit, comfort, and appearance. During the product development process, the main point of evaluation for a sample garment is the fit session.

During a fit session, a fit model tries on the garment and provides insight to the fit and comfort of a garment. The fit model represents the shape and size of the target customer, and is not a fashion model. However, human fit models, unlike dress forms, can vary in their measurements and may not be perfectly symmetrical (Farr, Stone, Auliff, & Ouverson, 1996; Workman & Lentz, 2000). Typically, the fit session participants include designers, merchandisers, product development managers, and pattern makers. These

individuals work together to evaluate the garment. Decisions made during the fit session may result in acceptance, revision, or rejection of a sample garment.

While fit sessions may be complicated by many factors including quality, price, delivery schedule, and production operations, they are important because they lead directly to consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with fit. Companies that maximize the potential of their fit sessions can generate better-fitting garments and higher sales.

The goal of this study was to identify best practices and areas for improvement in fit sessions. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed to gain insight to the dynamics of fit sessions. The results were integrated to create recommendations for improved fit sessions.

Method and Sample

The researchers observed fit sessions at two large US apparel manufacturers during faculty internships and workshops. A survey was developed based on these observations and was sent via e-mail to 96 employees who participate in fit sessions as part of their job requirements at a large manufacturer of athletic apparel. The survey included multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a content analysis where appropriate. A return rate of 56% provided responses from 23 developers, 14 technical designers, 7 designers, and 0 merchandisers who work for seven different product categories including men, women, and children. 53% held an apparel-related degree and all indicated previous professional apparel experience.

Results

Organization and communication are critical elements for most meetings, including fit sessions. Before a fit session, team members prepare with a review of spec sheets, garment product requests, and submit sheets for each garment. The spec sheet and product request accompany garments to the fit session. In practice, 82% of the respondents reviewed the spec sheet before the fit session. Documentation, in a variety of forms, was used by 74% of the respondents to record fit session notes, 26% did not record notes.

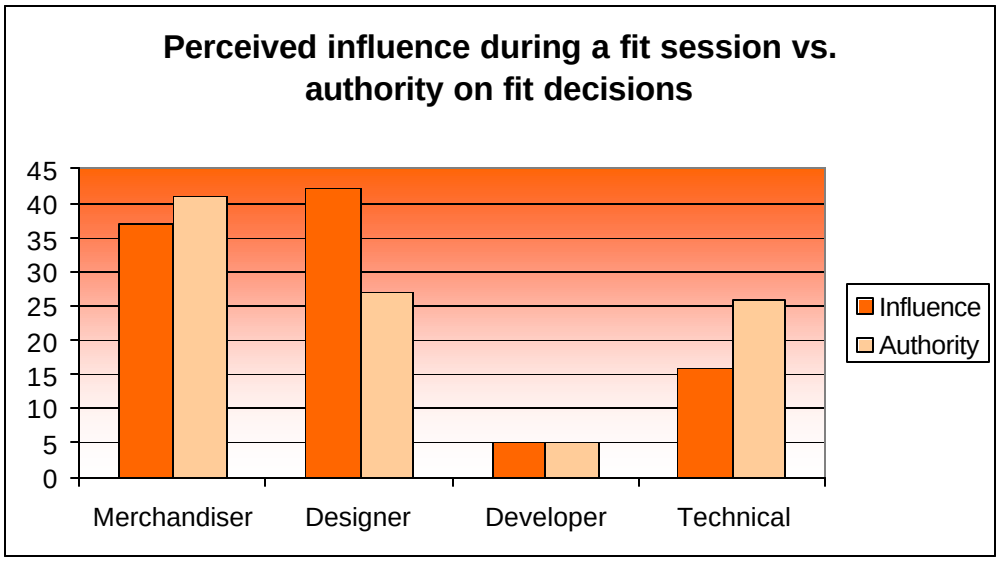
The average garment (94%) goes through two to three fitting sessions that last 1-2 hours each. Fit sessions are held an average 4-6 times per season for 28% of the respondents' groups and over 15 times per season for 30% of the respondents' groups. These translate into added costs in terms of personnel, fit models and product development, but are also dependent on number of garments.

Most product groups used one male and one female fit model. The female fit model has been used by the manufacturer for five years. Model measurements were not checked before each fit session; however, the company specifications for each size are posted in the fitting room. When asked how the variation between fit model measurements and company specifications were communicated, the following responses were representative.

- *"They have been here so long, they are just "known". Measurements are usually posted in the fit rooms."*
- *"Our group doesn't know the model's measurements. We just found out that he had sloped shoulders."*
- *"Reminder by tech designer and developer when merchandisers are trying to fit model too closely."*

The top three concerns during a fit session were reported by 42% of respondents as Fit, 40 % of respondents as Design/Aesthetics including appearance, style, design lines, and details, and by 18 % of respondents as Fabric. Designers (43%) were perceived to have the most influence during a fit session, followed by merchandisers (33%), technical designers (18%) and product development managers (6%). However, merchandisers

(44%) were perceived to have the most authority regarding fit decisions, followed by designers (32%) and technical designers (19%).



Respondents were asked in an open-ended question to describe what issues hinder fit sessions. Responses were categorized into groups based on content, and are reported in order of frequency of mention. The most frequently mentioned theme was 1) Re-designing instead of fitting, and is illustrated in this quote, *"Style is redesigned while we chase fit." 2)* Getting "side-tracked" reflected the dynamics of the session and is exemplified with this comment, *"Side conversations about things that do not affect fit. Explaining why some things work or don't work."* When the sample was fabricated from 3) Incorrect fabric, it was seen as an unnecessary hindrance to the evaluation and approval process. It was also an issue for some team members as illustrated in this comment, *"incorrect fabric or color. While most designers can see past this many do not… I was once told by my merchandiser to have another sample made because the current one wasn't 'cool' enough."* 4) Challenging fit issues ranked fourth in number of time mentions, and included areas, and of the body which are difficult to fit such as the rise and armholes as well as concerns with the perception of correct fit as shown in this quote, *"Getting hung up on fitting too snugly (no drag lines at all) on our fit model."* 5) Problems with communicating changes reflected concerns with understanding how something should fit as well as the documentation process which are both evidenced in this comment, *"Changes made to a 3rd proto that contradict the changes made on the 2nd proto. EX: sleeve opening changed from 4 ½" to 4 ¼" and back again."* 6) The absence of key decision makers from the fit sessions was a logistical issue that impacted the timely approval of samples. Categories with fewer than six comments included General communication, Incorrect samples, Too many participants, and Lack of preparedness, however, the following comments revealed potential causes to the previous issues, *"there is a territorial issue in most fit sessions.", "Unclear roles and responsibilities especially with who has final decision.", and* "Too many *cooks in the kitchen!"*.

Summary

The results of this study and our previous observations of fit sessions strongly indicate that fit sessions encompass product development decisions that extend beyond the fit of the garment. The

evaluation of the design is of equal importance. The name of the meeting, "fit session" implies that fit is the main topic for discussion. However, the first time a garment is evaluated for fit is also the first time the team has seen the design concept in the correct fabrication on a live body. It also provides one of the few opportunities for the team to jointly evaluate the garment, taking advantage of the synergy that occurs from pulling creative, technical, production, and business team members together

Could fit and design be evaluated separately? This is a valid question based on the results of this study. However, it would require careful consideration as the more technical elements of fit must be fully integrated with the more aesthetic design considerations of a successful, saleable garment. This would be a major shift in the practice of most companies, but provides a strong direction for future research.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the results of this study and our previous observations of fit sessions. While the overall goal of the fit session, to approve garments for production, was the same for each team, the dynamics of each fit session varied according to the individual team, the stage of development for the garment, and the length of time to delivery.

The clarification of the role and responsibility of each person attending a fit session and the appointment of a team member to lead the fit session will help to focus the meeting. Identifying and embracing the strengths of the team members may provide guidance as to their appropriate roles. Consider that the strength of the designers is their attention to the aesthetic qualities of the garment, the strength of the technical designers or patternmakers is their insight to fit and sizing issues, and the strength of the merchandisers is their understanding of the market and what will sell. Standard fit session training for current and new team members will help to align goals and expectations.

The development of a standard method to document notes and changes will improve communication. There are several product development management (PDM) systems on the market that will support this effort and this company is in the process of integrating a PDM system.

A protocol for checking the measurements of the fit models should be developed. Some variation in fit models should be utilized so that the variation present in the target market is represented.

Companies should explore and experiment with new technology to support the improvement and consistency of fit. The manufacturer in this study has experimented with the use of dress forms developed from body scans of the live fit models with varied success. One group is using a virtual 3D fit model with great success. Focused projects like these require support at all levels and realistic expectations for their contributions.

This study would be strengthened with the participation of merchandising team members. It was striking that the members perceived to have the most power regarding fit decisions did not respond. Further study that explores separate design and fit evaluation will contribute to understanding the dynamics of a fit session. Continued research using body scanning technology to abstract the body/garment relationship and exploring dynamic fit with a motion analysis system have potential to increase our understanding of the evaluation of garments on the body.

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