

Production management

Taking orders from retailers, whilst quite an achievement, is only part of the challenge of running a successful designer brand. How a designer manages the garment production cycle can be the difference between success and failure. Production management of your hard-won orders is a vital skill that applies to a fashion clothing business irrespective of the size of the orders. The same pressures, problems and delays will affect you, whether you are making 50 garments or 50,000 garments a season. The only differences between these two scenarios are the numbers. The skills required to manage the process efficiently are exactly the same.

Many designers use a proprietary software system for the management of their orders and docket (production orders to the factory). These software tools can be a huge benefit to your business and, as you grow, they become more and more vital. They can be sourced on the internet under 'fashion production software systems'. However these systems do come at a cost and your business may not be ready to bear this administration expense just yet. In the eventuality that you are not ready for a software system, you will need to create your own modus operandi so that you, and your staff or helpers, have a clear sequence of actions to follow.

The procedure for putting your sales orders 'into work' (i.e. into production) breaks down into these sections:

- Collating Sales Orders
- Collating Purchase Orders



- Sourcing Manufacturers
- Factory Selection
- Production Bookings
- Building a Docket
- Issuing a Docket
- Monitoring Production
- Taking Delivery
- Problem Solving
- Dispute Resolution

Collating Sales Orders

This is the first stage in the whole manufacturing process. Without creating an overview of your production requirements you will be tackling your manufacturing process in a piece-meal fashion which would have disastrous consequences.

The ideal way to achieve this is to create a spreadsheet 'Production Schedule' showing the total orders against each style – and the delivery details that apply. This schedule will form the foundation of your whole production management system.

Best Practice

- Use the Production Schedule.

Collating Purchase Orders

Now that you have a total for each style, you need to calculate your requirements for every fabric, button, zip and label and get them ordered as soon as you can. It is vital to obtain a clear delivery date from your fabric and component suppliers, as usually the factory will base the delivery date that they quote on the date that you can give them the complete set of components that they need to make the order. The factory cannot quote an accurate date unless they have all the fabric and trim information. Many orders are delayed each season because something is not supplied in time. £10 worth of missing labels can result in a cancellation costing thousands of pounds.

Best Practice

- Get a realistic delivery date from your fabric and trim suppliers.
- Tell your supplier to use your docket or style number as a reference number on the purchase order.



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Sourcing Manufacturers

Every designer needs the skills and support of a reliable manufacturer. Finding these factories can be a challenge, so make sure that you use any friends, contacts or professional networks and scour the web to identify the best candidates.

Once you have done your research and compiled a list of manufacturers it is important to assess their suitability to be part of your network of suppliers. This can only be carried out by visiting their premises and seeing how they work.

When you visit is very important not just to assess the physical conditions and making procedures of the factory but to get some idea of how well organised they are. For example, are all the trims for the factory's docket kept clearly labelled in one place?

Are the working areas clear of clutter and is their paperwork neatly organised? Whilst good organisation is no guarantee of good quality garments, a well organised manufacturer will be more likely to have well organised production.

Ascertain, during your visit, how and when the payments are required by the factory. You are unlikely to get credit terms straight away but if you stick to your part of the bargain, pay promptly and build the relationship, it will almost certainly follow that credit terms become available.

Points to consider

- What other designers do they work for – do those designers have the same quality and pricing strategy as you?
- Is the factory willing and able to make your quantities for your dates?
- Are the factories' Health and Safety, ethical and housekeeping working practices compatible with your business?
- Can they achieve the quality that your customers expect within the price that you can afford to pay?
- Is it feasible to have your orders in this location? Can you get there easily and cheaply? Will you be able to 'pop down there' in the event of a problem?
- Is the owner/manager the sort of person you can create a business relationship with?
- Make sure you discuss and understand the factory's payment terms.
- Will the factory sign the Code of Practice?

Best Practice

- Use the Factory Assessment Form to rate the factory as a viable supplier.

Factory Selection

Now that you have compiled a list of potential manufacturers, you have to match the factory to the orders. If your collection is multi-category and includes, for example, tailoring, jersey and soft dresses, then your choice of manufacturer will be determined by



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their technical capabilities. If, when you visited them, they were making lined tweed skirts are you going to be successful giving them a docket of silk dresses? Despite what the factory tells you, the decision to place the work with them can only be made by you based on your own observations. The safest way to select is on the basis of the sample that they make for you of the style in question – although cost is an obvious factor here.

Points to consider

- Can the factory achieve the price you need?
- Can they meet the delivery date?
- Are they technically competent in that product category?

Best Practice

- Get a sample made by your chosen manufacturer and agree the price.
- Use the Code of Practice to outline both parties' responsibilities.

Production Bookings

So at this stage you have your sales orders, your fabric and trim requirements and you know who is going to make the docket.

Good practice is now to make a production booking with your factory so that they can 'block out' some production space for your orders. This production booking will be influenced by the delivery date of your fabric and trims. If your component dates are delayed then the production booking dates should also be extended. Remember that production cannot commence until all fabrics and trims are in place.

Best Practice

- Constantly review purchase orders and update production bookings if suppliers are late with deliveries.
- Keep the factory informed of delays so that they can 'juggle' their bookings and run at optimum efficiency.
- Use the Production Schedule.

Building a Docket

In an ideal situation it is preferable to collect all fabric and components in one place so that once everything has been delivered into your studio you can pass it to the factory with the docket (their purchase order). In this way you are giving the factory everything they need to make the order at the same time. This is undoubtedly the best way to do this as it dramatically increases the chances of the factory being able to keep to agreed delivery dates.



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However, it is not always practical to avoid sending deliveries of fabric and trims direct from the supplier to the factory. If this direct delivery occurs it is very important that the factory understands their responsibility in recording the direct delivery and notifying you that it has come into them.

Best Practice

- Build your docket fabrics and trims so that you can pass them over to the factory all at once.
- Get delivery notes from the factory of goods that were delivered direct to them on your behalf.
- Tell the factory when you have sent something so that they can look out for it.
- Remember to record the different components of the garment to ensure that you are aware of each fabric and trim, keep the information for this garment along with the information for the other garments in the collection.

Issuing a Docket

The docket is the order to your factory that tells them exactly:

- What style to make.
- How many garments and the size breakdown.
- What components they need to use.
- What the delivery date is.
- The price that was agreed when the style was sampled.

It is very important that the details are correct. It is too late to change the size breakdown when the cloth has been cut.

Best Practice

- Make sure the factory owner/manager is aware that they have received the docket.
- Get them to re-confirm that the delivery date is still realistic, as the production booking may have been made several weeks earlier.
- Issue a docket that clearly references the Production Booking that you put on the Production Schedule earlier.
- Ensure that changes to orders and dockets are communicated promptly to the factory and ascertain if the changes affect deliveries in any way.

Monitoring Production

Most professional production managers will use a variety of methods to maintain contact.



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Progress can be monitored by phone and email updates but there is absolutely no substitute for visiting the factory on a regular basis. By your regular visits you will become prominent in the eyes of the factory and stand a better chance of creating a good working relationship.

Best Practice

- Visit the factory at least once a week whilst they are in production.
- Use the Quality Control and Checklist.
- Use the Production Schedule to monitor progress of your orders.

Taking Delivery

Once the garments are ready it is your responsibility to get them from the factory to your chosen location. The garments should be thoroughly checked for quality and quantity before they leave the factory. It is too late to rectify any problems once they leave the makers' premises.

Be very careful about sending interns or part-time staff to collect the finished garments. The factory will have spent a long time pressing and finishing the order and careless handling will negate much of their work.

Best Practice

- Check the garments for quality and count them.
- Make sure the garments are bagged and are not going to fall off the hanger.
- Where possible, use a professional hanging garment delivery service to bring them to you.
- Take delivery of the orders on the date you agreed on the docket.
- Pay the factory on the agreed date as per the Code of Practice.

Problem Solving

Inevitably, despite everyone's best endeavours, things go awry when using factories. The most common problems in dealing with manufacturers are:

- Delays to your orders.
- Quality issues.
- Missing/lost components.
- Fabric problems disrupting the work-plan.

How the problem is handled with the factory will have a significant effect, not only on the order, but also on your relationship with the management and staff of the factory as



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well as on your customer. It is important that production problems have as little impact as possible on your customers and their perception of you as a reliable fashion supplier.

Best Practice

- If the problem has been caused by the factory get them to acknowledge the fact.
- If the problem is quality related use the Quality Control section.
- Where possible, give the factory time to rectify problems.
- Keep the customer informed immediately of any delays or alterations to their orders.
- Use your relationship with the factory to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution.
- Have more than one factory that can make each product type.
- If the cause of the problem is unclear, try and go halves with the factory on any costs that need to be incurred.

Dispute Resolution

Getting into a dispute with a factory that is producing your orders should be avoided at all costs. Many thousands of pounds of your money will be tied up in the orders you have entrusted to one manufacturer. Not only that, but your reputation in the industry will be judged on how efficiently you produce and deliver. If you enter into a dispute that cannot be easily resolved you run the risk of incurring cancellations and other financial penalties, as well as risking damage to your reputation.

Whilst the courts are there to deal with commercial disputes, this is really the very last course of action that you should consider and is the least favourable option.

Best Practice

- Prevent the dispute occurring by negotiating a solution.
- Build a relationship to minimise the chance of a dispute happening.



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