

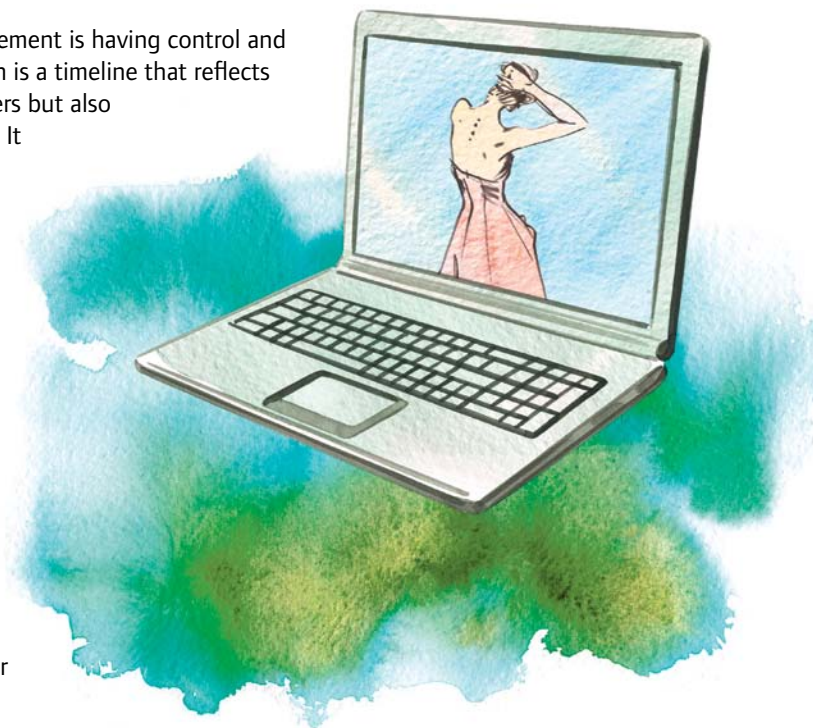
Critical path management

One of the principles of good practice in production management is having control and knowledge of the critical path for your orders. A critical path is a timeline that reflects not only the anticipated delivery date of your purchase orders but also the reality of the processes needed to fulfil those deliveries. It is vital to be aware of the impact that late deliveries will have on your deliveries to your customers. Without proper knowledge of the whereabouts of your fabric and trims in the production process, you risk incurring disruption and delay to your production and consequent cancellation of your orders and non-payment from stores.

Many designers use a proprietary software system for the management of their critical path. 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. But you are advised to invest in them as soon as you are able to do so. If you are not ready for a software system, you will need to create your own method of critical path management.

The first step is to know where everything for your orders is going to come from and how long it takes to get them once ordered. You should have a rough idea of the lead times on fabric and trims before you take orders from your customers. It is quite common, and not very professional, for designers to take orders on a particular fabric only to find that it is unavailable due to long lead times, or that there are large minimums that can't be met by your order. It is no good quoting end-July delivery to your stockists, if the Italian fabric supplier cannot produce your order until after the August closure.

It is, unfortunately, quite common for some designers to assume that once the fabric has been delivered to the factory, the dockets will go straight into production. Many factories will not, or cannot, start the production until all the accompanying trims are there. It is not uncommon to hear of large orders being cancelled because the late delivery of labels meant that the docket 'missed its slot' in the factory's production schedule. A delay with £10 of labels can jeopardise an order worth many thousands of pounds.



The biggest influence on your delivery dates is, however, how the factory performs once they have all the necessary components in their possession. If you visit a factory in March and it quotes you three weeks delivery, don't assume that it will still be three weeks if you only give them the docket in July, when the whole industry is so much busier.

Once you have sold your collection, and calculated the requirements for your purchase orders of fabric and trims, you need to ensure that you keep track of each fabric and trim used in your collection so that they can be monitored. Don't forget that it is not just these physical items that will affect the delivery date of your garments but also the services that are required to bring your orders to fruition, e.g. pattern-cutting, printing, embroidering etc.

Best Practice

- Speak to all your suppliers and establish the lead-time for all the fabrics and trims in your collection – do not guess.
- Create an Outlook diary (or similar) in which you can record when all your purchase orders are due.
- Use this diary to check the progress with your suppliers on a weekly basis.
- Keep the factory informed of delays to docket components so that they can juggle their production accordingly – it is in your best interests for the factory to be running efficiently.
- Know which country your component orders are being produced in and the method of shipping.
- Be aware of factory closures in holiday periods – Italy and France in particular.
- Don't assume that the factory knows that vital fabrics and trims have been delivered to them – warn them they are coming and get an acknowledgement that the items have arrived safely.
- If fabric or components are delivered direct from your suppliers to the factory, it is vital that the goods are checked for correctness and counted before the factory starts to use them.



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