

Rethinking Enterprise Software to Deliver on the Promise of PLM

The Fashion Lifecycle Doesn't End with Sample Approval, Why Should PLM?



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To build lasting success, today's fashion and softgoods companies must work faster and more efficiently than ever before. Perhaps more so than in any other industry, time, cost, and other competitive pressures leave little room for guesswork and mistakes. Whether they source products from full-package providers or take a more hands-on approach to manufacturing, most recognize that the design, product development, and sourcing processes represent the greatest opportunity for business improvements.

Not only do these activities account for a major percentage of overall cycle times, it is also when key decisions are made that dictate the vast majority of costs and eventual sales performance of their products. These and other factors have driven companies to integrate these tasks and foster greater collaboration among teams and vendors that participate in these mission-critical activities.

Increasingly, small and large businesses alike have turned to Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) software to reduce cycle times and increase control over the historically unstructured product development process. Some of these companies began their quest decades ago by implementing Product Data Management (PDM) software, which later gave way to the promise of the more comprehensive PLM solution.

But after making significant investments in time and money in "best-of-breed" PLM systems, few retailers and brands have actually realized their goal of a single, integrated system capable of managing the complete fashion product lifecycle. While it is clear that PLM has brought significant improvements and value to the development process, the promise of integrated merchandise planning, design, sourcing and production capabilities has advanced rather slowly and remains largely unmet. This disconnect is due, in large part, to the reality that independent PLM vendors must either develop much of these capabilities from scratch or rely on integration partners to bridge the gap. Many of these vendors lack needed experience in transactional processes like raw materials purchasing and finished goods tracking. Even the largest multi-industry PLM providers find the development of effective merchandise planning, sourcing, and other tools suitable for the fashion industry time consuming and difficult. While integration of supply chain, ERP, and other systems with PLM can make information more accessible across the enterprise, the costs and maintenance of this integration can present challenges for many fashion companies. Even after investing in the integration, troublesome functional and visibility gaps often still remain in the business process.

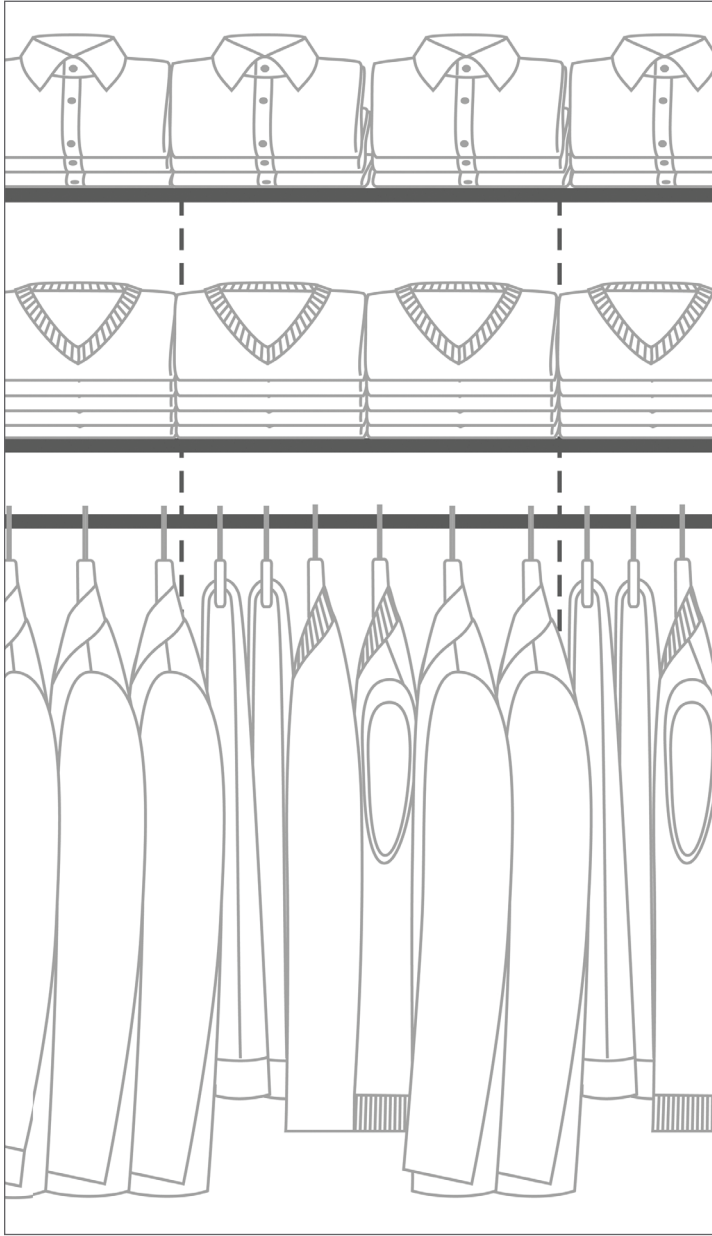
Realigning System Capabilities to Changing Industry Needs

To avoid these pitfalls and achieve a more effective solution, a fast-growing number of companies are turning to a new breed of enterprise software that combines PLM with capabilities more traditionally resident in the ERP system to deliver a wide-range of design, development, sourcing, and manufacturing capabilities aligned specifically with the requirements of the fashion and softgoods industry.

As a case in point, sleepwear, intimates, and childrenswear wholesaler Komar, Inc. is working with Computer Generated Solutions to implement the **BlueCherry®** Design & Sourcing Suite across its portfolio of nearly 100 lifestyle brands and licenses. In addition to leveraging the more traditional product development capabilities of the system, the New York-based company also uses the system to support a network of factories in fourteen different countries.

Looking to move beyond traditional systems integration strategies, other companies are also finding that this newly redefined approach can vastly extend the capabilities of PLM to provide greater control over raw materials and finished goods sourcing, testing compliance, quality assurance, and other key business activities. Of special interest to many is the ability to leverage web-based PLM tools to generate and manage CPSIA, General Certificate of Conformity (GCC), and other required compliance documentation. Quality

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assurance tools provided through the web or in a convenient mobile app enable more efficient and effective Acceptable Quality Level (AQL) standards, onsite sample approvals, mill and factory scorecarding, and other quality initiatives.

Extended Purchasing and Process Tracking

While most PLM solutions offer basic tools for managing the sampling process, a more process-driven design and sourcing solution can provide the full range of raw materials and product purchasing and tracking capabilities for both samples and production within a single system. This enables fashion companies to move

through sampling and directly into production with the exact same tools and system. Of course, moving vendor collaboration capabilities online also improves access to information, enhances collaboration, and increases process visibility for teams and vendors.

Perhaps even more importantly, extending workflow management, time and action calendar, and automated alerts and notification capabilities of PLM into the sourcing and manufacturing processes can provide massive benefits in the form of development and production, cycle time reduction, design to delivery visibility, and overall business control. Extending some of the robust reporting capabilities typically limited to ERP system into the front-end processes also serves to eliminate another commonly identified weakness in traditional PLM systems.

Ellery Homestyles, a leading supplier of branded and private label home fashions to major retailers, has embraced the extended design and sourcing suite concept. With an extensive line of curtains, bedding, throws and specialty products, the company recently deployed the [BlueCherry®](#) system to take advantage of its unique combination of fabric development, raw materials tracking, sample management, workflow management, and web-based sourcing capabilities.

Bringing Design into the PLM Process

In addition to taking on downstream sourcing and production capabilities, this new breed of fashion PLM is also gaining effectiveness in early stage fashion processes. While PLM has traditionally provided centralized storage for designs and technical sketches, the creation of these images and related information has not been well integrated into the PLM workflow. In most cases, designs and storyboards are created using separate CAD design tools and loaded manually into PLM as an additional step during the product development stage.

To streamline and integrate designers into the Design & Sourcing Suite, a new Adobe® Illustrator® plug-in technology adds a simple PLM toolbar to the popular design tool that enables designers to quickly and easily post their images, product information, and line lists directly into the PLM product record. This convenient tool also enables a bi-directional flow of information between the systems. Metadata attached to images existing in the PLM, for example, can be viewed and edited when the image is opened in Illustrator. Illustrator images can also be viewed and printed in the PLM application.

Designers and developers may also choose to use graphic design tools built into the PLM to create images or drag and drop and fabric, color, product, and other components needed to create mood and style boards. Much of this information is also used to streamline the product planning process.

Merchandise and Line Planning

Significant opportunities for improvement also exist in the merchandise and line planning process. While some have attempted to incorporate planning capabilities, the complexity and variety of planning methodology used across

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In addition to the obvious benefits to fashion brands and manufacturers, softlines retailers are also taking strong interest in the combined planning to production order capabilities. One New York-based women's luxury clothing, shoes, and accessories retailer recently implemented the system primarily to take advantage of these powerful merchandise planning capabilities.

Increasing the Value of PLM to the Business

By extending the footprint of PLM from product development to a more robust Design and Sourcing Suite, this newly defined combination of PLM and ERP capabilities enables fashion companies to more effectively manage the entire fashion process; from an image to a design, from a design to a style, from a style to a collection, from a collection to a merchandise plan, from a plan to manufacturing requirements, and from MRP to automatic purchase order generation.

Important additional benefits come from the fact that the system also provides full auditing and tracking of this extended process. Automatic notification of changes and scheduling deviations vastly improves visibility and control over the entire process.

The combination of this new systems approach and several innovative new technologies significantly streamlines and consolidates the entire fashion lifecycle into a single system that meets and exceeds the original promise of PLM. With these and many other benefits, it is clear that breaking down the traditional barriers between PLM and ERP capabilities can unlock greater value for apparel retailers, brands, and manufacturers.

the industry continue to make it difficult for best-of-breed PLM suppliers to deliver useful fashion industry planning tools. As a result, many companies using PLM continue to rely on external spreadsheets for the planning process.

To address this largely unmet promise, the new breed of PLM leverages expertise from ERP to provide more robust and flexible planning tools. By maintaining the familiar usability of Microsoft® Excel®, these new line planning capabilities enable companies to use personalized planning rules to promote a line list into a detailed merchandise plan. This plan can be generated from historical information (including EDI 852 point-of-sale information) using simple, weighted, or other averaging strategies to provide plans that include everything from topline budgets down to individual products, colors, and size details. Using tools borrowed from ERP, this plan can then be promoted to a complete fabric, trim, and finished goods requirements (MRP) with automated purchase order generation.