



Controlling

With shoppers today demanding instant trend gratification, product

Words Alison Clements Illustration Adam Howling

The likes of Lady Gaga's outrageous stage outfits and Scarlett Johansson's show-stopping awards night dresses are seen by millions just minutes after entering the limelight. Communicated instantly across celebrity news websites, fashion blogs, chatrooms and social media networks, these celebrity trends – just as much as the catwalks – are influencing what fashion fans want to wear. But to exploit this instant demand and maximise their profits, retailers must interpret concepts almost as quickly as they appear, while controlling costs. This puts huge pressure on their product lifecycle management (PLM) – the lifecycle of a product from inception to the finished article – meaning retailers must do all they can to enhance their PLM.

For many British retailers who manufacture their own clothing and footwear, most product lifecycle communication boils down to Excel spreadsheets being emailed back and forth between designers, buyers, merchandising planners, quality control and suppliers. Some have more sophisticated enterprise resource planning and data management systems, and integration may well have been introduced upstream in the supply chain to ensure closer collaboration with suppliers. However, in the past three years there has been growing interest in the possible benefits of enhancing in-house systems with a

dedicated fashion PLM platform from suppliers such as Lawson, Lectra, Gerber, Setlog, Tradestone and Dassault Systèmes.

Specialised PLM packages include modules for line planning, storyboarding, colour management, computer-aided design (CAD), management of fabrics and trims, management of product data, cost estimation, sourcing and supplier management, and tracking a product's development through the production process. PLM software has the ability to unite designers, suppliers and retailers across a single technology platform, potentially cutting weeks out of the production and supply cycle.

Managing workflow

"You may have suppliers recommending a fabric or wash when they see early design ideas on the system," says Susan Olivier, director at Dassault Systèmes. "Or if a designer decides to change an element of the trim on a shift dress, the impact in terms of availability, cost per unit and production schedule can be instantly calculated for all to see. Workflow calendars help relevant parties stick to agreed deadlines, and decisions can be made and acted upon much more quickly."

Robert McKee, industry strategy director at PLM software supplier Lawson Software, says retailers can ill afford to ignore such benefits. "PLM systems can deliver faster time-to-market, an improved cost structure and an improvement in quality. They essentially give a single view of the whole

process – from design and development right through to sourcing and supply chain. Everyone involved will access one version of truth, a seamless end-to-end data flow, which cuts out duplication of work, errors and delays, and allows greater control of products, margins and relationships throughout the supply chain."

Lifestyle retailer Gap is believed to have spent \$30m (£20.4m) on such a PLM project in recent years, and fast-fashion retailer H&M is also understood to have invested in third-party PLM software. In the UK, Marks & Spencer and New Look are also rumoured to be looking at investing in third-party PLM software, while Paul Smith, Hugo Boss, Mango and Guess are already using it.

Boardsports brand Quiksilver's investment in Dassault Systèmes' Enovia program has enabled closer collaboration with suppliers on designs and trends in real time. Chris Schreiber, vice president of technical services at Quiksilver, says: "If the information is available to be seen and accessed by us and our suppliers there is no limit to what can be achieved creatively. PLM allows us to leverage good local and good global information."

Grev Lushington, head of brand logistics and multichannel at Aurora Fashions, whose retail portfolio includes Oasis and Karen Millen, says Aurora has robust in-house data management systems but is evolving towards greater visi-



the lifecycle

lifecycle management can help retailers ensure they stay ahead of the game

bility. "It's clear that in fashion today, having an end-to-end data stream is going to be invaluable, as it allows for more collaboration and far greater efficiency." He believes retailers can build on their existing structures as a cost-efficient way to improve visibility. "There's great scope for having standardised templates for garments to take time and cost out of the production cycle," says Lushington. "Suppliers can gear up for a production run while designers are finalising trims, beading, buttoning etc."

Creatives can access a 'digital library' of previous style ideas and garment templates on Gerber Technology's YuniquePLM system, giving them a user-friendly way of doing their job speedily. "Also, if designers have more time to create, rather than spending hours sending emails and chasing sample test results and supplier feedback, the product will be better," says Yvonne Heinen-Foudeh, marketing director Europe for Gerber Technology.

She believes smaller players will move towards PLM systems in the coming years, as they can add modules – such as for line planning, storyboarding and colour management – gradually. "For small players to survive, smart sourcing will be key, so these systems can really help," she says. "Also, there's a corporate social responsibility imperative for being able to track and trace where product has come from. Again, the data is all there on the PLM platform."

Cost savings are attracting retailers to PLM software, says Judy Gnaedig, director of strategic projects at PLM systems supplier Lectra. "Product development resources are more productive with our system, so you can create more designs with the same resources," she says. "Our retail clients are also benefiting from lower admin costs, and fewer prototypes are required. Crucially, processes can be speeded up and there are fewer errors in production."

Meeting demand

It is vital to tie in sourcing and supply chain planning with the creative side of fashion PLM. "The beauty of the technology is that you can better manage internal workflow and integrate it with external workflow," says Guido Brackelsberg, managing director of Setlog.

"Big retailers are now sourcing in China, Bangladesh and South America to keep prices down, so on top of the pressure to deliver new styles quickly, there's a relatively new pressure of keeping in touch with different suppliers all over the world." His view is that demand planning is where PLM systems deliver increasing value.

Some retailers are holding back from a full PLM implementation, as it can be costly and disruptive or they believe their existing systems are adequate. Smaller-scale, tailored solutions can also be used. "One danger is investing in a PLM platform but only deploying a fraction of what it can do," says Keith Taylor, chief executive of 4Retail. 4Retail's product is an 'on-demand retail collaboration solution', which works like an

online forum supporting product development. "Relevant parties can log into one central source of data from wherever they are, which cuts down on the need for email," says Taylor. "All activities are logged so you know whether actions have been taken or not." Retailers including M&S, Aurora Fashions, Arcadia and John Lewis are using the system in a variety of ways.

Andrew Lambert, projects director at consultancy The PLM Practice, says the sheer scale of some applications can make implementation challenging for organisations. "Retailers need to be confident they can cope with the change management required to get such big new systems bedded in, and a new work culture accepted by so many different parties," says Lambert. "Also, we should remember that PLM is just as much about process management – how and when people do things – as it is about technology. Often, if partners in the process define and agree what their objectives are to start with, much can be achieved. Time savings and efficiencies can be made without the need for technology in many cases."

But McKee at Lawson Software predicts more reliance on technology to survive an uncertain future. "The organisations that are doing well in fashion retail today are those that can read and react fastest to the needs of customers." ●

