

The merchandisers in apparel export business have an important role to ensure and assure quality. This is mainly due to the fact that the merchandiser is the key link between the factory and the customer. Merchandiser plays an important role in communicating the customer demands and making sure the factory capabilities are optimally utilized by generating enough profitable business. In this brief article, I have shared my thoughts on how merchandisers can contribute to the overall process of quality improvement in an apparel manufacturing organization.

Role of Merchandisers in ensuring Quality

When asked about the role of Merchandisers in ensuring quality, following answers were received from merchandisers of various apparel exporting firms from National Capital Region of India during our numerous training programs during the implementation of Quality Improvement Program in apparel factories.

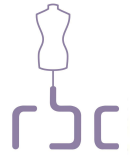
- Provide correct and clear information on time to relevant departments
- Ensure fabric quality
- Ensure production friendly samples
- On time sealer sample availability
- Make sure to get the sources of accessories and fabrics at as early as sampling stage of the style
- Ensure timely trims arrival
- Ensure right first time submissions to buyer to save time, money and reputation
- Ensure timely approvals from buyers
- Identify possible problems in the style and the ways to avoid them
- Discuss the style, its target and its T&A with production team
- Timely handing over production file with all the required contents
- Timely preparation of budget for fabric and trims
- Conduct/be present for in-line inspection to anticipate defects and avoidance of the same in the future.
- Merchant should regularly visit production floor in order to locate if any defect is left unnoticed

All the points identified above are relevant and must be attended to. Sizable improvement on these will surely help your organization in improving the product as well as service quality.

Merchandisers must remember that 'Customer Satisfaction is not enough'

One the most commonly used definition of quality is customer satisfaction, but we must remember that in today's world everybody knows about this definition and everybody is promising so called 'customer satisfaction'. It is another matter that they are not able to fulfil the promise.

But the companies that aim to lead in today's competitive market must aim for something more than customer satisfaction. That is why companies are aiming to achieve '**Consumer Delight**', through making customer feel special, very happy or pleasantly surprised with your product and or service. Remember '**Loyalty is absence of better alternative**'. The day customer finds a better alternative the



loyalty start to shake. That is why we have to reinvent and constantly improve to be able to be the best alternative for our customers.

What the merchandisers must do?

I have been interacting with merchandising teams from time to time. I am surprised to learn that most of them do not measure their customer satisfaction level on a regular basis. Merchandisers can follow following steps to improve the customer satisfaction.

- Track customer satisfaction level on regular basis through structured formats
- Identify the gaps in customer satisfaction by analyzing the customer complaints or routine communication. Another indicator of customer satisfaction level in the final inspection report by the customer. These too are seldom analysed by merchandisers.
- Identify the causes for the main factors contributing to customer dissatisfaction and or identify factors that will delight the customer
- Acquire knowledge on problem solving techniques ?Work out an action plan for improvement aimed at improving customer satisfaction in consultation with factory team
- Implement the plan and track the improvement
- Refine the plan for further improvement

Some of the areas merchandisers can start looking at are:

Delay Analysis: Measure the extent of overall and process-wise delays and find out the causes for the same. Evaluate which causes are controllable and take corrective actions to eliminate these causes.

Analyse the problems faced in different styles handled per season: This can be easily done using a check sheet. This exercise can clearly highlight common problems encountered from product development up to post shipment stage.

Considering the factory as internal customer:

The key to achieving customer satisfactions is to start satisfying the internal customer. Our experience shows that there exists sizable communication gap between the merchandising teams and production team. Similar situation exists between merchandising and fabric procurement teams. While it is important for the merchandising teams to assess the customer (buyer) satisfaction level, it is equally important to assess the internal customer satisfaction level.

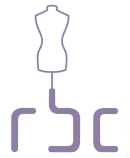
The internal customers of merchandising function are all the departments/ entities that depend on inputs from merchandising for carrying out their task. If the merchandisers try to genuinely understand the internal customer expectations and fulfil them, the dependent (internal customer) departments will be able to improve their right first time quality level. This will also improve communication, cooperation and team work between factory and the merchandising team. This in turn can help the merchandisers and the organization in satisfying external customers.

Conclusion

Merchandisers have a very crucial role to play in achieving right first time quality in apparel exporting companies. Higher right first time quality level in products and services will make the organization a

QUALITY MANAGEMENT FOR MERCHANDISERS

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desirable business partner for the international apparel buyers. To achieve this goal the merchandising teams must, on a regular basis, track external and internal customer satisfaction level, identify the gaps, develop action plan for improvement, implement the plan, review the results and refine the plan or draw the plan for the next level of improvement. This way merchandising teams would be able to contribute significantly to the overall efforts of apparel manufacturing organizations for improving competitiveness through continual improvement in quality.