

Part 4: Developing the Fashion Image

Fashion touches all types and varieties of product classifications from apparel, accessories, and footwear to home décor, furniture, kitchen utensils and home appliances, to cars, boats and motorcycles. There are very few products in the marketplace that are not in some manner impacted by fashion design and/or the fashion cycle. Fashion permeates all aspects of our environment.

Therefore, the retailer must assure that a constant and consistent fashion image is established and maintained by his retail business in order to establish the store's identity and fashion leadership in the community. From the signage and exterior of the store to its entrance and window displays, the fashion image becomes evident to the consumer through the exterior and interior décor and visual merchandise presentation, especially the displays with the types of props and attention-getting devices utilized to attract the target consumer.

Fashion image:

- reflects the degree of fashion leadership the store seeks to project (e.g., fashion innovator, fashion expert, fashion follower, fashion laggard)
- is identified by the stage of the fashion cycle that its merchandise assortments represent and the target consumer it chooses to attract and service
- is one aspect of store image
- is determined by the store's customers, store size, channel of distribution in which it operates, and fashion leadership it establishes.

To develop the fashion image, as with developing the store image, there are six steps. Those steps include the following:

- profile target consumer
- develop a store environment that is natural and comfortable for the target consumer
- create the fashion merchandising policy for the store
- establish the markdown procedures for merchandising and establish the pricing policies for merchandise assortments
- develop the selling techniques related to the fashion image
- establish policies for the fashion obligation and fashion education in the community.

Profiling the target consumer (Refer to Part 1 of this section.) and developing the store environment (Refer to Parts 2 and 3 of this section.) have been discussed in detail. In this section, *Part 5: Establish the Merchandising Policy*, the merchandising policy, including markdown procedures and pricing policies, will also be expounded upon.

For a brief review from the discussions in previous parts, remember that the retailer must reflect the tempo of fashion through the store's atmosphere, décor, and environment. When creating the store image, the retailer simultaneously creates a fashion personality for the store and generates excitement and specific expectations pertaining to fashion in the mind of the target consumer.

Based on the retailer's strategic plan and management philosophy, the retailer must determine a long-range guide for the store's fashion aims and level, standards of merchandise quality, price ranges for product classifications, and attitudes and policies toward the competition. Fashion merchandise assortments should match the lifestyles of the customers as well as the needs and wants of those

consumers. Additionally, every product classification assortment in the store should coordinate with all others.

For example, accessories such as jewelry and handbags should be on the same fashion level and in similar price ranges as the apparel offerings. The brands carried by the retailer should be complementary and compatible in order to produce multiple or add-on sales. If the shoe collection is at a different fashion level than the apparel for the target consumer, then the retailer, more than likely, will be attracting two different target consumers or will be losing sales to its competition. Plus, neither of the consumer segments being targeted by the retailer will be happy with the selection of the store's merchandise. One consumer will not be able to make an apparel selection, while the other customer will not find the shoes needed to complete the total look!

When establishing the fashion merchandising policy, the retailer must first decide upon the *fashion level* (i.e., basic versus fashion and staple versus seasonal) of the *merchandise mix* (i.e., all product categories and classifications carried by the retailer). Additionally, the *industry zones* (i.e., designer, bridge, contemporary, better, moderate, popular) from which the merchandise is procured must be selected. Also, the types of brands and product categories plus classifications available from those branded companies carried in the store must be identified. The selection of the fashion level, industry zones, and brand types determines the number of seasons that new merchandise will be purchased and delivered to the store.

The ladies apparel industry and oftentimes other apparel segments, such as children's and youngmen's wear, are organized into zones. These *zones* are based on a) lifestyle of the consumer, b) the level of fashion or design expertise exhibited intrinsically in the product, c) the taste level of the consumer or the consumer's perception of the position of the product on the Buying-Selling Curve (Refer to diagram of curve in this section.), d) the current fashion trends in the market (i.e., themes, silhouette types, colorways, patterns, trims), e) types, quality, and finesse of fabrications, f) standards of quality for workmanship in product and/or technology incorporated into design, g) price range of product classifications, and h) size ranges of product.



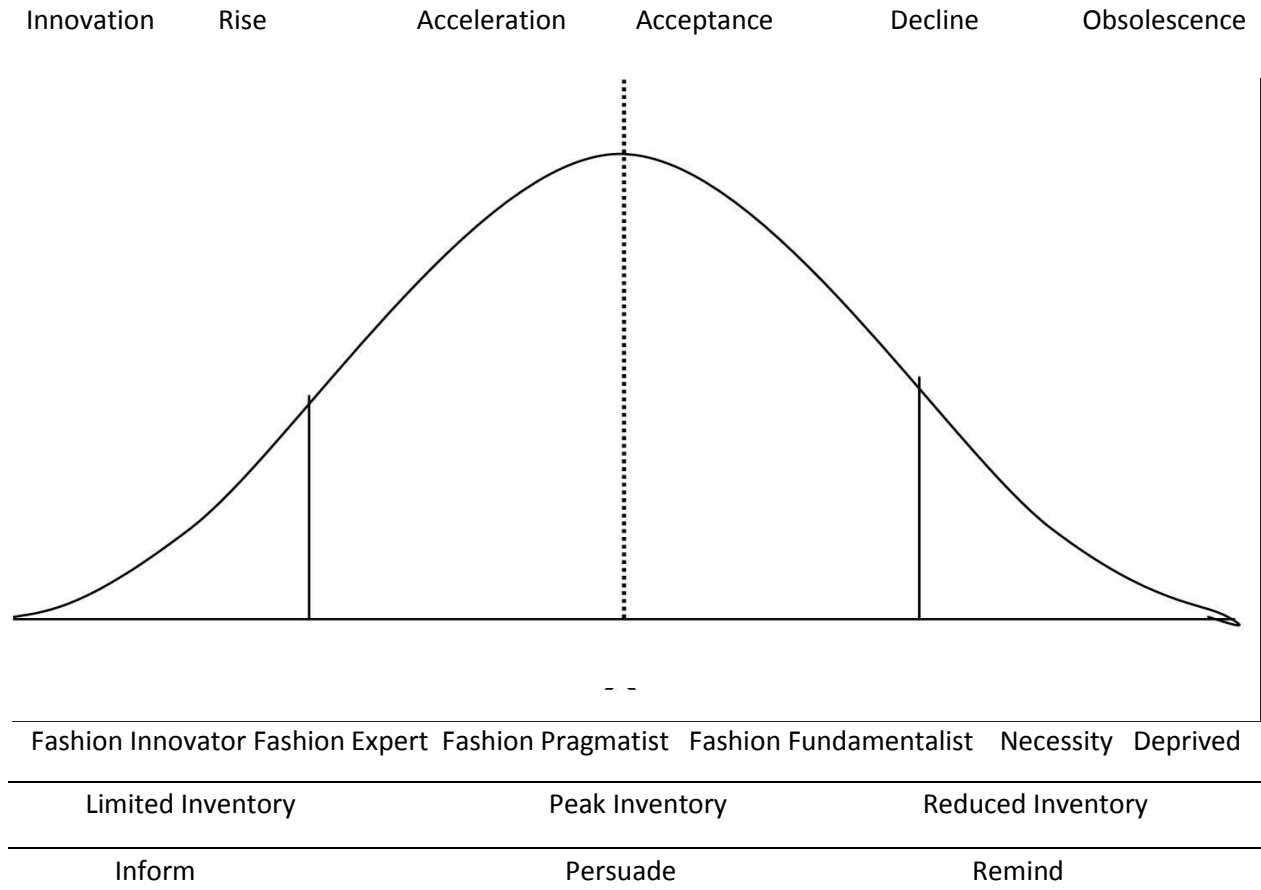
Vendors in the various industry zones target retailers in specific channels of distribution, as well as the lifestyles of their retail clients' specified target consumer segments. As previously pointed out, the number of seasonal lines produced by a vendor is influenced by the zone in which the vendor produces product; and, the various types of *brands*, such as designer, national, private label, private brand, and generic brands, are produced within specific zones of the industry.

The number of *seasonal lines* that a vendor produces and the retailer buys is based on the retail calendar. The retail year is not based on a calendar year. Rather it begins in February and ends in January of the next year. The retail year is divided into two major seasons, Spring and Fall. The Spring season begins with February and ends in July, while the Fall season begins in August and ends in January of the next year. The retail year is divided into two six month periods – *Spring* (i.e., spring and summer seasons) and *Fall* (i.e., fall, winter, holiday seasons).

Most retailers buy from three to five fashion lines of the vendor's seasonal product lines per year. All retail merchandising, promotional events, and fashion activities revolve around the number of seasonal product lines the retailer buys and the delivery timeline those lines are received into the store. The product must be merchandised and displayed in store for the target consumer to preview before the peak selling period for a particular seasonal line. Thus, the visual merchandiser has a huge responsibility in merchandising and displaying trendy, seasonal arrivals in a timely manner. Additionally, the visual merchandiser must pinpoint the major fashion trends for the season and present those trends early in the season. The visual presentation must educate the consumer about the innovativeness of the product and encourage the consumer to take action and purchase the product for her/his lifestyle activities.

A tool for correlating fashion trend information into the merchandising process that is used by both the retail buyer and visual merchandiser is the *Buying-Selling Curve*. (Refer to the schematic of the curve below.) This curve mirrors the bell-shape curve of the Product Life Cycle and follows the same format of the cycle, beginning with innovation and ending with decline and obsolescence. The curve is based on the *fashion level* of the product category. It relates the product fashion level to merchandising activities needed to provide the target consumer with the fashion product, at the right time, and in the right place.

Buying-Selling Curve*



[Adapted from Kincaid, Gibson & Woodard (2004)] – *Fashion Level, Consumer Type, Inventory Level, Marketing Technique

For the purpose of analyzing the merchandising of fashion products, the curve is divided into six substages: innovation, rise, acceleration, general acceptance, decline and obsolescence. Not all stores carry fashion merchandise in the initial substages of the curve or all of the other substages. However, all fashion merchandise, regardless of the stage when received in the store, gradually travels through the cycle to eventually become obsolete.

Designer merchandise begins with the *innovation substage* and is usually a one-of-a-kind designer product. Being very exquisite, high-priced merchandise, this product is usually offered to the “fashion trend setter” who has a highly developed sense of design as well as the income and taste level to purchase this designer merchandise. The retail buyer selectively purchases limited sizes and quantities of this merchandise, and receives the merchandise very early in the buying season.

The visual merchandiser must present designer merchandise at the very beginning of the selling season or as soon as it arrives in the store in order to inform the target consumer of its availability. This merchandise must be featured and displayed with great flare and fashion expertise, since the product

accrues higher markdowns in this particular fashion level due to the design attributes and higher price points of the product.



Many specialty stores carry fashion merchandise in the next two substages, *rise* and *acceleration*. The target consumers in these substages are the “fashion expert” and “fashion pragmatist”. The fashion expert is aware of the latest fashion trends and purchases the product at the very beginning of the selling season. This merchandise is very trendy or viewed as the most up-to-date items available for purchase by a large segment of the population. These fashion items should be featured very early in the selling season and the visual merchandiser must “romance” the trends and products in order to teach the consumer “how to” wear and coordinate the products for successful incorporation into the lifestyle of the consumers.

The fashion pragmatist waits until the trend or style is accepted by a substantial group of people before purchasing the product. Moreover, this consumer is more practical with regard to the selection of design attributes of the merchandise. This customer, therefore, often purchases wardrobe building pieces that can be incorporated into the current wardrobe or worn for a longer period of time.

In these two substages the consumer desires maximum coverage of trendy, fashionable merchandise in a variety of styles, colors, fabrications, and brands. The stock is peaked during the acceleration substage and reorders are frequently placed if the vendor has the demanded product available for shipping. The marketing technique continues to be that of providing information in order to alert the consumer of both the trend and the store’s selection of merchandise. It is the responsibility of the visual merchandiser to create enticing merchandise presentations and displays in order to feature the latest versions of the design and the latest techniques for wearing or using the product.



After the trend or fashion is accepted by the general public, the style is positioned in the *general acceptance* substage. All consumers are accustomed to this fashion product or have “trained the fashion eye” to accept or appreciate the look. The fashion is available in many versions, in all price ranges, sizes, fabrications, and colors. Additionally, all store types and departments within those stores carry a knock-off or an adaptation of the product design. The retailer’s major marketing thrust for this substage is to persuade the target consumer to shop his store. In this stage, the visual merchandiser’s major responsibility is to present and display the product in various colors and fabrications at a wide range of price points and in various lifestyle settings. The merchandise presentation and displays in the store must be the “silent seller” that motivates the consumer to buy a particular product from this retailer rather than purchasing the product from the competition!

In the remaining two substages of *decline* and *obsolescence* the merchandise is usually offered at a markdown retail price and/or is purchased for sale by discount stores or other retail outlets. In today’s competitive retail environment, discount stores and other types of retail outlets are utilizing trendy merchandise presentations and display techniques in order to sell off-price product as well as product produced only for a specific retailer in a particular channel of distribution.

In summary, the positioning of the retail store’s fashion product on the Buying-Selling Curve helps to assist the visual merchandiser in establishing the store’s fashion image. Based on that positioning, the visual merchandiser can create timely merchandise presentations and displays that attract the target consumer and build add-on or multiple sales. Moreover, pinpointing the fashion level of the merchandise assortment is imperative for the visual merchandiser, since the level impacts the selection of appropriate fashion themes, props, and attention-getting devices when creating effective displays. In

the displays, the sophistication level or lack thereof are most important in attracting a specific target consumer.

Two other factors to consider when establishing the store's fashion image are developing the selling techniques related to the fashion image and establishing policies for the fashion obligation and fashion education in the community. The fashion leadership and selling techniques are keyed to the type of fashion image that the store would like to project. For example, specialty stores usually train sales associates to speak with authority about fashion trends and to present new fashion concepts with confidence and finesse. Further these associates are expected to "dress the part" and to represent the retailer while participating in community events. On the other hand, some stores only require the sales personnel to answer customer questions, locate the desired merchandise requested by the consumer, or provide minimal customer service. The various types of selling techniques "speak loudly" to the consumer and establish the fashion leadership of the retailer.

When establishing merchandising policies, oftentimes, retailers set policies for participating in community happenings and fashion events. Retailers who wish to establish fashion leadership in the community assist customers in analyzing, understanding, and interpreting fashion trends that are workable for the consumer in the local community. By providing fashion information, these retailers assist customers in developing a fashion awareness and direct those consumers in formulating an experimental attitude and fashion judgment. The ultimate objective of the fashion retailer, as well as visual merchandiser, is to teach the consumer to transition from season to season and build confidence in incorporating seasonal merchandise into fashion statements that express the fashion taste level and individuality of that specific consumer. Then the consumer develops confidence in the retailer's presentation of fashion products and accepts the fashion leadership of a particular retailer.

