

## Colour, Texture, Ornament, Line: A Question for Managers Do you know how your designers think?

JACK WILLOCK

### Introduction.

Many young people coming into industry from management training or business education courses, or indeed science, often experience difficulties coping with the aesthetic content of merchandise decision making. It has been said to me so many times by such young and capable potential managers that, having achieved high standards in literacy and numeracy, they find they have lacked a "visual" education. This leads to a lack of confidence in their dealings with the areas of design, particularly those concerned with the aesthetics. Where, for example, in many textiles and most garment businesses, it is these visual and tactile qualities that sell the products, such managers are isolated or remote from the crucial area of judgement on which the success of the business hinges. The tendency is then to leave these areas to the control of those fitted, indeed gifted, to do it; with the manager thus concluding that these are skills that they themselves just do not have. They give full credit to those who possess them—"it's just in them, you know". Our colours are chosen by Elsa (the consultant stylist) who "just feels and knows" what is right. Too often I have met with this response from managers who accept the aesthetics area as a mystique-view which is very often encouraged by the gifted ones.

From the point of view of a successful business making and selling fashionable products in which the visual and tactile qualities are the key factors in obtaining sales, it is simply not good enough to have management who are not in tune with these qualities, as well. It must be right to be sympathetic to and understand the main product qualities that make for commercial success. To do so does not require managers to become designers, or indeed, necessarily to be design trained. A sense of "merchandise" is what is required. A factory flowline makes a product which becomes merchandise, (as the design team envisaged it at the outset) as the product begins to relate to the market place. Acquiring or building up a sense of merchandise has many angles, some of which will be the subject for other written pieces. For this one, we are concerned with the aspects which help to overcome the "mystique"

gap that has widened between the literate and numerate manager and the design stylist concerned with visual and tactile aesthetics.

A useful starting point is to encourage the young manager, by participation and observation, to ascertain how the designer thinks. Obviously this varies with the individual designer. It has been the subject of much study by psychologists and educators. For those seeking to probe this subject in depth, they have recourse to all this recorded research. However, for us at a practical level, it is perhaps better to stick with a concrete example and this is given in Case A.

CASE A  
A KNITWEAR DESIGNER STYLIST'S REACTIONS  
TO A NEW YARN

**The Business.**

The Company produces and sells branded knitwear, mainly ladies' and children's, to specialist retail shops. The line shown twice a year (Spring and Autumn) has two collections within it, one being classic fully-fashioned and the other being cut and sewn, power flat-frame knitted garments, with design or fashion interest. It is fashionable, but not way out, for young women in the level above chain store, but not the disco boutiques. The Company also undertakes contract work for one of the main chain stores, designed by the same stylists and made by the same design technicians. Contract work is knitted in the main knitting room, usually in a special machine section, but is made-up and finished in a separate factory.

**The Meeting.**

The Designer Stylist for the cut-and-sewn garment section is meeting with the representative of a yarn spinner who has called in to show his season's range of yarns, in general, and specifically to present one new inclusion which has a novel design feature. This particular yarn spinner produces, in addition to standard plain knitting yarns, a small collection of dyed yarns with design interest, such as slubby yarns, bouclés, knops and other fancy twisted effects. He offers these in a range of shades, *ex stock*, which he has judged to be fashionable and commercially right for women's wear. The spinner has a staff yarn designer who is a technical person with creative flair and works in a small sampling department, with access, as necessary, to production machines in the mill alongside. The aesthetic development of these yarns is guided by a freelance stylist who works on a consulting basis. She visits shows, at home and abroad,

and generally researches fashion trends for several clients in different but related fashion and textile trades. Although this advice is primarily related to colours and textures, the stylist consultant also indicates the best stitches to knit the yarns up into to show clients. In addition, she provides some fashion sketches and cutting from magazines to suggest how the new yarn may be made-up into currently fashionable trend garments.

### **The Presentation.**

The representative of the spinner is thus able to present his story of the new yarn to the knitter's designer stylist, as follows:

- The new yarn
  - (a) wrappings, on boards to show the effect.
  - (b) the colours chosen to run as stock service; that is to say, the available range of shades.
  - (c) a sample cone, which may be left with an interested client for preliminary knitting-up trials on hand and power frame sampling machines.
- Pieces of fabric - to show how the yarn effect knits up into cloth, in a number of interesting stitch constructions and gauges.
- Fashion sketches/pictures - of garment styles to suggest those that are both fashion-right and use the yarn to best effect. Obviously, a fancy yarn effect costs more than a plain yarn so it is vital to see that the effect one is paying for shows to benefit and has design appeal. To do so requires the yarn to be shown, both knitted up, and with an indication of end use, including actual garments if possible.

*Garments* - Our particular spinner does not yet go to the extent of getting prototype garments knitted up to show to his potential clients. This, however, is increasingly done with the fibre producer and bigger spinners. They may take this as far as a specially designed collection, which can be modelled in the factory design room to demonstrate the yarn to the knitter client and also modelled for promotion purposes.

Promotion today goes well beyond the knitter, to the retailer and, indeed, the consuming public. Development and/or promotion garments are, today, one of the aspects of the total marketing concept. Natural fibres, such as wool by the International Wool Secretariat (IWS), and synthetics such as Courtelle by Courtaulds, are just two of many examples of products that consistently use this sophisticated technique to advantage.

## Designer reaction.

In addition to all the other influences on our knitwear designer stylist, the commercial situation he works for, the technologies he works with, the fashion world outside, cultural changes, and so on, there is now a new yarn influence, as outlined above. The objective of the spinner is to stimulate and arouse an interest in exploiting the new yarn as offered, in order to obtain sales orders for the product.

So, how does the Designer Stylist react to all of this? Bear in mind that, today, there are thousands upon thousands of yarns to choose from and anyone could be excused from getting yarn stagnation-punch drunk with yarn ideas, so to speak. All the fibres, natural and synthetic, the spuns and multifibre blends from at least six spinning systems, all the filaments, the combined, textured, doubled, folded, fancy doubled, metallics, strips, random processed yarns, and so on-unlimited options-but one thing is certain; a knitter can only cope with a limited number of them at a time if he is to retain some control of production. The designer stylist has then first to show interest in any new yarn for fashion reasons but secondly to be very selective about which to sample and run and be very sure about the reasons why.

As already stated, there is no standard designer reaction. It depends on the make-up of the individual. However, one set of reactions I have seen over some years with several knitwear designer stylist colleagues is as follows: From all the yarn, fabric, and style information displayed by the spinner, there are four characteristics to which the designer stylist is responding. Simply stated, these are:

Colour - Texture - Ornament - Line.

These attributes are judged initially by visual and tactile examination of the samples submitted (by eye and hand), and thereafter in the mind's eye as images.

*Colour* - Visual - judged by eye. The shades submitted are examined and images formed which suggest the best colour effects, either as single colours or when used in combination with others.

*Texture* - Visual - judged by eye, and Tactile - judged by hand. From the texture of the yarn and knitted pieces a vision of colour and texture possibilities is forming. Not only is this for the yarn's effect by itself, but also when combined with other yarns and textures.

*Ornament* - Images of the knitted structures, jacquard figuring, types of trim or embellishment (print, motif, lace, embroidery, etc.) that would enhance the effect are played around with in the mind.

*Line* - Similarly, the shape, drape, and silhouette of possible garments appears. (If the outlet is furnishings rather than apparel then *Line* refers to the hang of a curtain or drape over furniture, etc.)

### **The look.**

When these four qualities are “working together”, so to speak, they produce a total effect best described as a *look*. From this look the designer stylist will decide whether or not to continue to show interest or reject the yarn. The conditions for rejection are:

- (a) The look is a non-look, in that the qualities don't pull together and the effect is uninteresting.
- (b) The look is a repetition of what is already being run and enquiry reveals that there is no incentive to change production over to it (the yarn is neither better, easier to use nor more economical).
- (c) The look is moving out of fashion. (“You should have brought that out two seasons ago. It's going now but maybe it will come back in two of three years.”)
- (d) The look simply does not fit the house style (for example, a plastic, synthetic look for a house whose image is natural wool).

### **Other questions.**

However, assuming that the look possibilities, as visualised by the designer stylist, are interesting then she can proceed to ask a few simple questions (posed here in trade language).

- 1- Will it (the yarn) work on our machines?

This is a lead into discussion about counts of yarn, machine gauges, stitch limitations, in which the designer technician and/or sample maechanic joins in, as necessary.

- 2- Will it (the yarn) perform?

This simple question precipitates discussion about the performance characteristics in wear and wash. The spin must be related to the end use and the client's performance specification and methods of test. These tests aim to ensure customer/consumer satisfaction with minimal returns (in knitwear, this should be less than 0.5% for all reasons other than exchanges for fit when the client doesn't try it on in the shop, as, for example, in chain stores). The spinner normally shows supporting test data. The knitter's design technician and perhaps the quality controller, as well, are brought in to comment.

3- Are those the only colours?

The range of shades available is discussed with emphasis on

- (a) the movements of fashion;
- (b) meeting major buyers known colour ideas;
- (c) the conditions for obtaining special shades or exclusives (that is, the minimum quantities, surcharges for special dyeings and delivery times for special lots).

4- Delivery times for standard shades and sizes/types of packages, which are usually cones for knitting directly off.

5- Price per kilogram?

Associated with price may also be the yield, because some voluminous yarns may give a high yield, in terms of fabric area per kilogram, which partly offsets high price. Another factor considered if price is high, is the possibility of diluting the high priced yarn with lower priced plain yarn in the knitted structure. The creative skills of the design technician come into play here, with the objective of helping to average yarn material price, yet not lose or bury the aesthetics of the fancy yarn. Experience shows that, in the mass production sectors, a premium price over plain yarn of 30 to 50% for an effect can often still allow it to be used 100% in a textile or garment. However, if the premium for the effect doubles, triples or quadruples the yarn price compared with plain yarn, it is likely to either

- (a) limit the usage in 100% to the top price sectors and speciality goods which are low volume/high price level; or
- (b) lead to the yarn being used discreetly or sparingly as an effect thread in an otherwise plain yarn knitted cloth or garment, which can be at high volume/low or medium price levels.

### **Relating it to marketing outlets.**

The design stylist, aided by the views of the design technician, has now arrived at a point where she can consider the envisaged look(s) in relation to marketing outlets, as follows:

- (1) Does the look envisaged, coupled with quality and price options, fit in with, complement or add a new dimension to our house brand? If so, then samples would be ordered to initiate preliminary design work to produce just enough to show the yarn and its possibilities stylewise to the merchandiser of the house brand. (Note: The merchandiser in some cases takes part in the yarn discussions but now

with so many variables to consider, and pressures on time, delegation is the order of the day—committees are out—in fast moving fashion business.)

- (2) Does the look envisaged, coupled with quality and price options, offer opportunities for the house style of a major client? In the case here discussed, it would be the chain store for whom they make the contract garments.

If there is seen to scope here then samples are again ordered so that initial design work can take place for discussion at the right stage with the client's merchandise selector or buyer. One expects that the chain store client has heard of the new yarn or will shortly do so via the spinner direct or through other knitters. Discreet trade enquiries take place to save fruitless design costs and to help focus the time and effort where the greatest chance of success lies. There is no point in duplicating effort for nil returns. However, the fact that the retail chain, having seen the new yarn, has expressed little initial interest never deters the supplier knitters with highly creative stylists and technicians from going ahead if they see that their own special skills can make something that others cannot, or will simply catch-up with rather later. The same thinking applies with a widely sampled new effect yarn. The fact that others have seen it does not kill off the interest of confidently creative knitters. It merely sharpens up the competitive edge, and makes them more careful not to duplicate what they know others will undoubtedly do, based on their studio and craft skills. Of course, exclusivity is a bonus highly desirable in a commercial sense but hard to secure, at least for long. In the craft based and fashion trades, the best form of exclusivity is the lead given by being more clever, better skilled or faster moving than the competition.

### **Ordering samples.**

At this point, the design stylist has decided to go ahead and do some design work with the new yarn. This requires a sample order to be placed, for example, a cone of each of 12 shades. One cone in any shade is needed very quickly so that knitted structures can be worked on and, if need be, laboratory tested for performance. This sample knitting is the province of the designer technician, working with the designer stylist who at the same time proceeds to sketch ideas, suggest knits, indicate colours and trimmings, all in readiness for the full range of

colour samples to arrive. This is the starting point for the sample and prototype production to commence. This is a further chapter of the design story and is not covered here.

### **The manager's interests.**

The young literate and numerate managers, by participating with the designers in this appraisal of a newly offered novelty yarn may or may not personally respond to the aesthetics, but should at least fathom the logic and reasoning of the decision making process in the minds of the others. Through this participation they will usually find that designers can lucidly explain, to their satisfaction, the reasoning out of their responses and logic of their design decisions: How Colour plus Texture plus Ornament plus Line adds up to a look; How the attributes of this look in respect of Topicality, Fashion Interest, and Commercial value make it potentially good merchandise for inclusion in a range, or in a particular retail outlet, or worn by a type of consumer. Monetary values are the concern of the stylists, especially relating to what one would expect to pay for it in a shop, but the question of production cost details, selling price negotiations and margins are for the management to take on board, in the main.

In some cases, they will find that the reasoning and logic is not really dissimilar to that which they use in other management situations. By finding out how these decisions are arrived at, the manager becomes more confident in his ability to support sensibly the judgements of the designers by committing time, sample material and production space (which all cost money) to design work. It also helps management in the role of keeping designers fully motivated, especially through a long period of designing repetitive styles for a major buyer. For a creative person to have a "dry" period in such circumstances is not unknown. Managers also have to choose the young designers to work for them. Understanding the experiences recorded here aids this too. A similar problem exists with finding, selecting and hiring freelance/consultant services. These can be expensive, with trend forecast information equally so. Although decisions about selecting these last mentioned are often in the hands of designers the Manager has to authorise the expenditure and he should have the ability to make his own judgement on whether or not it is worthwhile. Design teams respect and welcome managers of this ilk, looking upon it as participative support to their relatively free, and certainly responsible, hand in the business enterprise.



In the end, a manager responsible for a business which sells products through their aesthetic qualities must either have some flair himself, or be able to recognise and back flair in others—otherwise the element of LUCK takes over. This note is an attempt to help most of the managers, that is, those who fall into the second category, to work their way towards a more effective “recognition and backing of flair” in their creative designers.

Design Management  
Trent Polytechnic,  
Nottingham, England