

Chasing Kate

Retailers should cash in on the new interest in Kate Middleton's wardrobe. But how can the vital speed to market be achieved?

Words Ana Santi

When Prince William told the world about his engagement to Kate Middleton last November, he unwittingly delivered the equivalent of an early – and ongoing – Christmas for fashion retailers. The blue Issa dress Middleton wore for the engagement announcement has since been interpreted by many a retailer, notably Tesco and Peacocks, which sold versions of the dress for £16 and £14 respectively. Tesco's version sold out online an hour after it went on sale. Shortly after, the princess-to-be was pictured wearing a white Reiss dress and Whistles blouse from previous seasons, prompting both retailers to reissue the products.

From now and in fact beyond the April 29 wedding day, all eyes will inevitably be on what she chooses to wear, just as they were with Princess Diana. While the big question remains over who will design her wedding dress, it's Middleton's everyday attire that will appeal to fast-fashion and mainstream retailers. But to maximise the sales potential of her wardrobe, retailers need to be on the ball: there is little time between Middleton being photographed in a desirable outfit and retailers getting it onto the shopfloor to maximise the sales opportunity.

According to technology experts, the answer lies in product lifecycle management (PLM) technology and its web-based systems. "PLM is where retailers use the least amount of technology; they're still relying on spreadsheets," says Robin Coles, director of consulting for supply chain solutions at BT, whose clients include Tommy Hilfiger.

He explains that with a PLM system, every detail of a particular product – from the design of a cuff to the fabric – is stored in one place that can be accessed

by everyone, be it the designer, supply chain manager or the manufacturer. As a result, if Middleton is pictured in a particular dress that would appeal to a retailer's customer base, that retailer could search its PLM archive for a similar design and tweak it accordingly, rather than start from scratch.

"A PLM system gives visibility across the supply chain," says Coles' colleague Keith Sherry, general manager of BT's supply chain solutions. "It's a platform that enables multiple stakeholders access to the same information – the retailer, the supplier, the manufacturer. You can have one discussion with five suppliers, where one says, 'I can give you 10,000 units within a week,' and another says, 'I can do 5,000 but in three days.'"

Balancing act

Peter Bambridge, senior PLM consultant at PLM consultancy Dassault Systèmes, believes a PLM system is vital to the critical path management of a product. "At a glance, management can see the workflow [of a product] and decide whether to speed up certain points of the process. For example, you might decide to fly in some of the units [to get them into store quickly] and ship out the rest," he says.

Does it all sound a little too good to be true? According to one PLM provider, most major UK fashion retailers don't use third-party PLM software; instead, they have systems developed for their own businesses. But why, given the supposed benefits? Cost could be one reason. One PLM software provider says it can cost companies about £150,000 per quarter.

As a result, Bambridge recommends a phased approach to businesses considering implementing such a system. "You might want to start with design and development, then introduce sourcing,"



Trendsetter: the Issa dress worn by Kate Middleton was soon imitated

REX





Look lively: (from left) Peacocks and Tesco rushed out versions of Middleton's blue Issa dress, while Reiss has reissued its white dress that she wore

« he suggests. “It’s a risk to put an entire business onto it. The [design and development part] would take you from the picture or sketch to the tech pack, which then gets sent to the factory.”

But Christopher Schyma, strategic account director for fashion at software provider Lectra, says the biggest obstacle preventing businesses from adopting PLM systems is not cost but a reluctance to embrace change. “We work in a very prehistoric way in the fashion industry,” he says. “If you’re communicating complex styles, how can you do it manually on a spreadsheet? It’s easy to make an error. One retailer had an incidence where they had 25,000 jackets made and the sleeves were three inches too short.”

In fact, Schyma insists fit is one area where “it could all go wrong” for a retailer without PLM technology. As well as the previous example, he points to the potential costs of sending prototypes and samples back and forth between a factory in Hong Kong and the head office in London. “You can

control that process with PLM,” he says. “We have 3D prototyping that allows the pattern cutter to eliminate the need for some alterations at sample stage.”

Andrew Dalziel, marketing director, fashion, at business IT firm Lawson Software, agrees, pointing out that to achieve such short lead times, samples sometimes have to be sent overnight. “Design and development is where PLM can help retailers the most,” he says.

Quick off the mark

But businesses without PLM systems are still turning around product at lightning speed. Ashu Kumar, director of Manchester supplier Influence, which works with the likes of Primark, Peacocks and Jane Norman, says he does not use PLM technology but can deliver the lead times fast-fashion retailers require by having constant dialogue and flexibility with factories. “You must communicate with your factories and make them understand why [a product needs to be turned around within a week].”

“ Design and development is where PLM can help retailers the most

Andrew Dalziel
Marketing director,
fashion,
Lawson Software

Kumar adds that Influence is adding more factories from European countries to its portfolio to help with speed to market. “We’re also investing heavily in our design teams. We have people out there spotting trends and immersing themselves in youth culture,” he explains.

Barbara Horspool, group design director at New Look, which does not have a third-party PLM system, is less concerned about direct copying of Middleton’s style and more about the impact the royal wedding itself will have on customers’ buying habits. She believes Middleton may also drive the trend for more grown-up dressing given her outfits, rather than one-hit pieces.

George at Asda brand director Fiona Lambert agrees. “Kate’s style of feminine, slightly more formal dressing and her choice of pared-down, understated dresses will have an influence on what women choose this year,” she says. “The look is timeless, so in a recession these will be investment pieces, not one-season wonders.” ●