SUE NOSWORTHY
NEXT

PRESENTATION

TEN THINGS A FASHION DESIGNER SHOULD KNOW ABOUT GLOBAL SOURCING TO BE GOOD AT HIS/HER JOB

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NEXT SOURCING LIMITED IS A WHOLLY – OWNED TRADING SUBSIDIARY OF NEXT RETAIL PLC. WE HAVE OUR OWN P&L ACCOUNTING SYSTEMS AND REPORTING LINES WE WERE AN EXTERNAL SUPPLIER BOUGHT OUT BY NEXT.

Although it benefits Next to buy from us, the Buyers have to buy the best product at the most advantageous prices and delivery times and we have to work hard to keep ourselves fresh and attractive to the 'client' with the best designed quality product.

Our offices are on Tottenham Court Road, London and we have about 24 Designers working out of this studio.

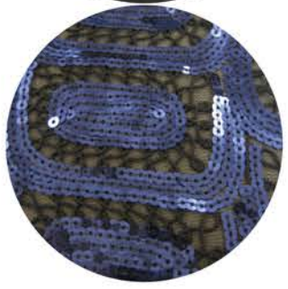
There is also a Press Office and the Next Directory Creative Department in the same building.

The Next Head Office is in Enderby, Leicester. This is where the Buying function takes place and it is a village of some 1500 employees including call centres etc.

People often ask how our design team differ from those in Leicester – in Leicester the Designer's role is to work with the Buyers on design and the balance of the range.

In our division, the job of the Designers is to enhance the manufacturing capabilities of the supply base and have a different and independent point of view.

We have production offices in Turkey, Sri Lanka, North & Southern India, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Bangladesh, Pakistan & Thailand.



CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND DEFERENCE IS A REALLY KEY SKILL WHEN TRYING TO PERSUADE AN OFF SHORE MERCHANDISE TEAM TO DO EXACTLY WHAT THE DESIGNER WANTS WHEN THEY WANT IT AND WHY.

Our Next Sourcing Designers all work in specific product areas for specific territories – for example we have a women's jersey designer for Hong Kong & China, one for Sri Lanka and one for India, one for Turkey and the same kind of set-up for women's casual wovens, coats and tailoring, knitwear, men's wovens, men's jersey etc.

They each make about 6 trips a year to their territory – and a couple of research shopping trips per year – usually one long haul to LA, New York or Tokyo and one to a European city – dependent on product type and trend information.

We also make great use of video conferencing between the offices.

We adhere to a strict Critical Path which roughly follows the following pattern: the Leicester Heads of Design, in conjunction with external consultants set the initial stories & colour palettes for the phases of the season.

This takes place about 10 months ahead of delivery to store. Directory is about a month or so earlier. There are usually 5 phases per season and in Womenswear there will be roughly 4-5 stories per phase across formal and casual wear, some stories running across maybe two phases.

Everyone attends the Design Presentations and then has Buyer discussions about who is going to work into what story and make sure the ranges include core product lines and price entry product as well as the high end fashion pieces.

Everyone then goes off and starts planning ranges, ordering sample fabrics, trims, dyeing lengths and trims to the colour palette, looking at artworks, toileing new shapes in time for range reviews & selection which is generally an 8-9 week turn around.

In between all this there will be Catwalk response and updates on trends, which all need pushing into the ranges closer to season so the designers are always working on several seasons and phases at the same time.

Then we plan their inspiration trips and territory trips, there are times of the year when the buyers and buying managers will go too.

Roughly speaking, the Designers send their design packs out to their Product Managers and Product Developers around 2 weeks after Design Presentation and then will go out to the territories about two to four weeks before Range Reviews to check on sample development, rework, fit and hopefully bring back samples to present, they also visit factories and source new trims and fabrics for newer stories and the next lot of samples.

In Fu Yung and Colombo we have sample rooms but all our other samples are made by the factories we intend putting production through.

Once a garment has been selected that is the end of the Designer's input and by then they've probably forgotten all about it until the Directory Preview lands on their desk because they are pre-occupied with the most current set of ranges.

We have a web-based global tracking system which among other things, monitors the amount of samples a designer produces and their hit rate and sales.

Much of our design work starts with the graphic designers who are an enormous resource for the whole studio across men's, women's, children's, knitwear, swimwear – and have been so successful this last year in which print demand has escalated, that even bedding and home ware want a slice of their action.

This team generate new prints – all-overs, placements, embroideries, branding, swing tickets.

They use a combination of CAD, hand drawing, stitching and sticking – in truth they turn out the work of twice their number and work incredibly hard as they work to everyone's deadlines.

They also have to rework, recolour and change artwork bought in from independent creative agencies.

Some garment designers also create their own graphics for their own product area.

Fabric Sourcing is a key first stage operation and we have a Fabric Sourcing expert in the London office who seeks out suitable fabrics for Turkey and the Near East and another team in Hong Kong for the Far East.

We have NSL Accessory and Bodycare Designers based in the Retail offices in Leicester.

We also have about 4 designers who work offshore. A few years ago we did an experiment and asked who would like the opportunity of an ex-pat life in Hong Kong and some went out and had a great time – sample quality and speed really improved. We then also carried out the same exercise for Turkey. Then as the Shanghai Office expanded we moved or recruited new Designers to live and work in Shanghai.

This worked really well for some product areas more than others and so some have come back and some have asked to come back because they feel too far from "Fashion" and the target market but some – as in our Shanghai offices will remain as it is working well for denim and casual jackets.

We have used local designers in Hong Kong and India with some success but it varies from product to product and depends very much on the personality and abilities of each designer. It works best if they have been UK or US trained. I think for women's jersey in particular, the designers need to "Live the Life" and being in London they react faster to new trends and ideas.

As the designers say, you can get loads of information via the internet, WGSN, Stylesight and so on but there is nothing like being in the thick of it, seeing what people are wearing, watching, doing, what's selling, what's not, ferreting out interesting vintage, exhibitions etc.

At Next Sourcing Limited we have experienced designers who can hold their own in a remote factory, know about production methods yet don't lose their sense of retail reality while travelling. They also need to have the personality and confidence to convince and inspire the Buyers to buy new product. We are however starting to take on more junior types and a regular intern for training.

I also asked my team what they would want students to know about our type of business and this is our list of "Ten Things"

ASSUMING TALENT AND INDUSTRIOUSNESS WITH A FEEL FOR MASS FASHION AS A PRE-REQUISITE THEY NEED TO BE:

1. Passionately involved in their work and ready to go off to the other side of the world at a moment's notice with a clean full passport, visas, inoculations where necessary and a washbag, clean underwear at the ready, a pile of spec sheets, tearsheets and lots of wit and energy.
2. Be organised and practical – plan ahead and pre-empt everyone else's deadlines – the fabric mills, trim suppliers, pattern cutters, sample machinists, couriers, buyer's range building.
3. Cultural sensitivity and deference is a really key skill when trying to persuade an off shore merchandise team to do exactly what the designer wants when they want it and why. A good sense of geography and history helps (I once had someone asking for an Indian Visa to go to Bangladesh).

Without this, Designers won't build good relationships with the Product Development teams in Sri Lanka, India, China, or elsewhere in the world.

Bad relations between factories and Designers & Product Managers can be very counter-productive.

The staff in the countries where we are making have a very different set of values to us and it can be really antagonising for them to see "rich" westerners squandering money and resources (even though the factory bosses can be very rich). Most of them haven't a clue why we want all these clothes but it provides a means of income for them so they will do it but they don't 'get' it and even some of the ex-pats can lose

EVERY DESIGNER NEEDS TO APPRECIATE THAT ALTHOUGH HE OR SHE MAY BE THE ORIGINATOR AND SOURCE OF CREATIVITY, THERE ARE A MULTITUDE OF PEOPLE ALONG THE SUPPLY PATH THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE FINAL PRODUCT.

touch with the home market after a while as they absorb local customs and culture.

4. Communication: Many of the people actually making the clothes don't have a clue why we want them or how we want them – it is a just a job supplying mysterious "Things" to a wealthy western country. Winter clothing produced in a hot climate can be an especial mystery.

   Absolutely essential to a designer getting successful samples are really clear specification sheets which can easily be understood by any technician whatever their language. Sometimes a spec sheet destined for Sri Lanka might be sent to China for cross-costing so every scrap of information must be totally clear and supported by as much information as possible.

   The Designer, when visiting territories needs to be able to think on his/her feet, be flexible, make instant decisions on the spot in often remote factories but must not lose site of the home market. They need to be able to draw with a pencil and paper as well as CAD.

   To this end it is vital they know about manufacturing techniques and how to capitalise on them, appreciate skills, factories, how different they can be country to country.

   Every designer needs to appreciate that although he or she may be the originator and source of creativity, there are a multitude of people along the supply path that contribute to the final product – many of whom think they are designers too – or wish they were!

5. We often ask at interview about eating habits – being an easy or adventurous eater is an advantage – some of the food can be really 'difficult' and "Vegetarianism" in China is practically non-existant as everything comes with pork scratchings.

6. We need designers who are physically fit and strong – sickness abroad is no fun and with so many continuous deadlines and hit rates to achieve, this is not a business for the fragile.

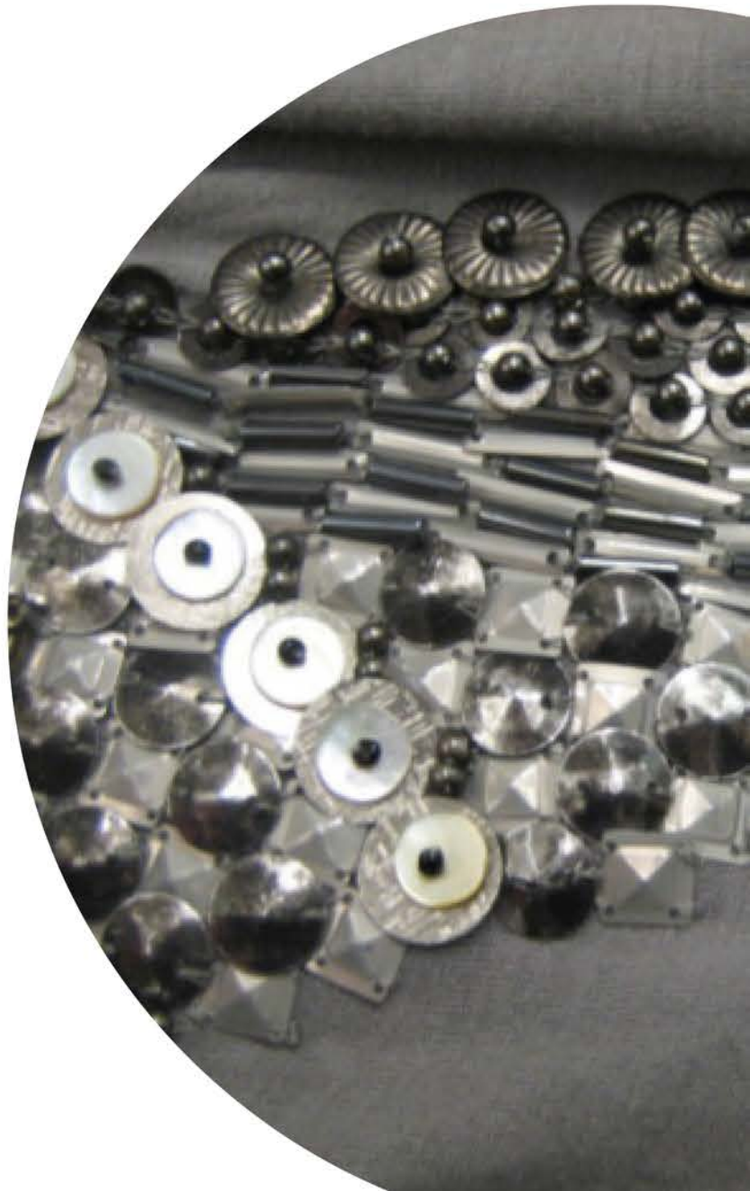
7. When recruiting we will look for evidence of a savvy traveller, people who will embrace the unexpected.

   We hired a girl once because (apart from her talent) she had been kidnapped by bandits while on holiday in Mexico. We have had a designer who once had to sleep on the airport floor in Southern India because her flight was cancelled, uncomfortable but it couldn't be allowed to become an issue. On occasions our Designers will miss important personal obligations because a trip has had to be extended to finish a project or accommodate a Buyer's visit.

8. On the plus side they often get to explore and have fun over weekends away and they stay in nice hotels or serviced apartments with pools and gyms and go to elephant sanctuaries or whatever but sometimes miss home comforts, the peripheral things that travelling designers miss are things like chatting on the phone to friends, home comforts instead of having to rely and wait on room service from strangers, eat in restaurants – some miss their partners but most find them understanding.

9. Copyright & Confidentiality: This is important wherever you work in fashion as "Inspiration" from other designers and brands is the lifeblood but it can be a source of lucrative litigation if one doesn't leave a paper trail of plagiarism-free design development. However this goes into another dimension when working with offshore factories. It is quite normal for factory managers in their anxiety to please, to show off the good work they have done for other retailers and brands and it is all too easy at times for a Buyer to say they want a 'version of' an idea that has been generated by another company's designer – likewise our own designers' work could equally end up being "Interpreted" by a rival – or not even a rival – another brand in another continent.

   As in most things, vigilance and a sense of balance is required – the designers always need to keep on the good side of the supplier base because they can be a good barometer of what everyone is selling and can confirm the Designers' own belief on trend progression but equally not all manufacturers truly understand the meaning of "Confidentiality" over the importance of filling their factories.

10. Our Designers are all ethically aware but it isn't their job to police the supply base – obviously they would flag up any breaches of ethical standards but Next has an Ethical Trading Policy Department and our Next Sourcing offices in each territory carry out strict inspections before a manufacturer can be approved for our Preferred Suppliers List. However it is the Designers, with the Product Developers who are closest to the supply base so they would be the first to notice child labour, badly treated workers, unsanitary workplaces.

I hope this helps some way in understanding the nature of our work and the requirements of the designer aspiring to this sort of life.