



2009

Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry

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Recommended Citation

Hayes, Lisa (2009) "Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry," *New England Journal of Entrepreneurship*: Vol. 12 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/neje/vol12/iss1/9>

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Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry

Cover Page Footnote

Book Reviews, Associate Editor Michele Masterfano.

Book Review

Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry

Lisa Hayes

Veronica Manlow, *Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry*, New Brunswick, NJ and London, UK: Transaction Publishers, 2007. 313 pages. \$34.95.

In *Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry*, author Veronica Manlow gives a detailed look into the fascinating world of fashion. If you have ever wondered what it would be like to experience the culture inside a fashion company, then you will truly enjoy this book. The unique fashion industry information provided is helpful for either launching a business or working in a related field. The reader will gain a better understanding of the fashion business and the role of individuals within the corporate fashion structure. The culture existing in the world of fashion is complex, competitive, vivid, pulsating, and very fast paced. By spending time as an insider at the world renowned fashion firm of Tommy Hilfiger, the author is able to share experiences specific to the world of fashion design and bring the reader along for the journey.

The five chapters in Part I of the book lay the foundation for understanding the fashion industry as it is today. The first chapter takes the reader on a brief trip through the history of modern-day clothing, showing how fashion has evolved over time. Fashion as a form of self-expression has long been a part of society. Fashion can portray a personal image and even create an identity. It is explained here how class and status, both of which can confer power or authority, take a leading role in the dynamic of dressing and thus shape the world of fashion.

Chapter two details the growth of the domestic fashion industry and shows how a new market is instantly created as the economy in the United States expands its middle class. The effect of French haute couture, which originated in Paris, is stressed, particularly how it continues to drive much of the industry today. By the late 1940s, America finally became a fashion center in its own right and subsequently the ready-to-wear business followed in the 1950s. This timeline allows the reader to fully comprehend the role that designers play in

today's corporate fashion culture. The current scope of the industry is accurately summed up with Manlow's quote: "Today's ready-to-wear fashions require a complex network of organizations traversing national boundaries sometimes for its design and increasingly for its production and dissemination—the latter being both actual (sales) and symbolic (media)" (Manlow 2007: 91).

In the third chapter, the author discusses the role of fashion designers within the industry: the diversity of their creative styles, the prominence they have achieved, and the power of their identity. Men's fashion and its history are examined as it relates to women's fashion. This is important as the author's case study in Part II chronicles a company whose designer, Tommy Hilfiger, started in men's wear, therefore filling a void in the U.S. marketplace. As society changed over time, and fashion gradually infiltrated all classes, designers became arbiters of personal style. The reader is introduced to Charles Fredrick Worth, credited with creating the first haute couture house in Paris and setting international fashion standards. Other influential designers such as Coco Chanel, Claire McCardell, and Bonnie Cashin are mentioned to illustrate how fashion houses function in Europe and the United States.

Manlow explains that the creation or development of a symbol or logo to represent a designer that could be used on clothing did much to add status to dressing. "The designer logo was an important development that would contribute to the broad recognition of designers and a massive demand for their highly visible products" (Manlow 2007: 99). A logo, such as the Ralph Lauren polo horse and rider, recognized around the world can represent the designer instantly and suggest a certain lifestyle that people are eager to be part of. It is also discussed that designers must be very creative, quick to recognize industry trends, and be exemplary leaders while developing new ideas and products on multiple levels.

The fourth chapter focuses on leadership within the fashion industry and the direct correlation to the ultimate success of the organization. Manlow focuses on leadership as it pertains to the creative enterprise that is common among design firms. The many examples presented show how the organization within the fashion industry is so diverse. She shows the importance of allowing flexibility from traditional

management structures and about other unique requirements. This helps to convey the high value placed on fashion industry leaders. "The personal charisma of the founding entrepreneur or the tradition provides the glue that holds the organization together" (Davis and Scase 2000). The author emphasizes the importance of charisma as it applies to the leaders or designers of both high fashion and mass market firms. Transferring charisma from an individual designer to an entire brand to maintain currency and excitement even after the original designer is no longer involved is paramount. Examples of this are outlined as necessary to keep a company vital in the competitive fashion industry. "Without such steps the Liz Claiborne name would have ceased to hold any significance in contemporary fashion let alone find the capital to continue to exist" (Manlow 2007: 160).

At the end of Part I Manlow compares many different types of organizational cultures within the fashion industry and discusses the direct impact on employees. The author explains why the mission of an organization should be collective and describes the fragile balance between the goals of the firm and those of the individual. From some of the examples, Manlow implies that the fashion business is not always fair. "In the fashion industry organizational effectiveness, or the success of a company, is not necessarily correlated with a fair and democratic work environment" (Manlow 2007: 170). The author discusses how frequently it is required at many fashion firms to possess the right look, which will reinforce the brand, merely to get hired.

References

Davis, Howard, and Scase, Richard. 2000. *Managing Creativity: The Dynamics of Work and Organization*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Manlow, Veronica. 2007. *Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization in the Fashion Industry*. 2007. New Brunswick, NJ and London, UK: Transaction Publishers.

Part II is a case study that gives insight into the culture at a real fashion company. The author spends time at the New York offices of Tommy Hilfiger Group and describes the organization's culture. It is implied that the culture reflects one of shared vision, values, collegiality, creativity, and innovation. Tommy Hilfiger himself is described as being a very charismatic leader who carries the company forward. The importance of prestige and the need to convey a particular lifestyle is emphasized. Physical aspects of the offices as well as management strategies are discussed. For added understanding of the industry as a whole, the design calendar or schedule by which all phases of design and merchandising must adhere to is outlined in this section. Interviews with various employees help make the experiences understandable and add credibility.

Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization of the Fashion Industry provides a comprehensive look at the fashion industry in America. Initially the historical information in the first chapter may not seem necessary, but the relevance quickly becomes apparent in subsequent chapters. Manlow's early history builds a meaningful foundation and reference by which to construct the total picture. The book provides a valuable insight into the world of fashion and its interaction with modern society. This book is a must-read for anyone considering a career in the American fashion industry as an entrepreneur. It can be used as a teaching tool on the university level to introduce the culture of fashion to students who may be interfacing with professionals in the fashion industry.



About the Author



LISA HAYES (lh25@drexel.edu) is an assistant professor at Drexel University in the Department of Fashion Design and Design & Merchandising. She has 18 years of experience as a fashion designer in New York and Philadelphia. Prof. Hayes has designed dresses for Albert Nipon and was head designer for Liz Claiborne's dress division and head designer of sportswear and dresses for "Mimi" stores for Motherswork. She currently is a freelance fashion designer and has done freelance home furnishings design for Anthropologie. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Syracuse University.

Prof. Hayes' area of research focuses on green fashion, textiles, and production as it relates to the future of design. She is currently working on the research, design, and production of an entirely "green" sportswear collection for presentation at the Eco-Fashion Show at the NCSU College of Textiles in North Carolina in April 2009. In November 2008 she presented her research on innovative synthetic fiber at for the International Conference on Sustainability of the Fashion Chain: Crop to Shop in New Delhi. Prof. Hayes has presented papers most recently at Costume Society of America and Virginia Association of Teachers conferences. She was also cocurator for "Inside the Designer's Studio: Bonnie Cashin" at the Leonard Pearlstein Gallery in Philadelphia. Prof. Hayes is a member of Costume Society of America, International Textile Apparel Association, and Fashion Group International.