

Fablabs and designers - the future of great retail

 By [Dave Nemeth](#)

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With technology moving at a rate of knots and the most exciting and innovative product developments coming from crowd-funding sites, the current model of retail product development needs to drastically change, and very quickly at that.

Let's first take a quick step back and see what we have learnt from consumer attitudes and trends over the past few years, as we emerge from the financial meltdown and general economic crisis of the past seven years:

- Consumers no longer have brand loyalty.
- Consumers want an "exciting and unique" retail experience.
- Consumers' online habits are increasing online sales.
- Consumers are buying into "crowd-funding" whereby they are guaranteed a unique product.
- Consumers want unique and differentiated product



Fablab - a trends department focusing on what is going to be the next exciting colour palette, key elements, materials, silhouettes for the future season.

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There are many other current trends, yet these five continually arise in many articles and reports from an array of industry professionals. Even knowing all of this, retailers continue to source products in the same old mundane way. Although this is a generalisation (and there are certain variations), the process is as follows:

1. Buying teams review the history of products.
2. International trips take place where they visit stores and look at trends; samples are bought.
3. Often these trips coincide with trade fairs, which are visited to source new suppliers.
4. On their return, these products are sent off to China for costing.
5. These products find their way into stores.

Surely with so many international brands, this is a completely outdated approach? (However, I am very aware of some locally designed brands in fashion, where a different approach has been taken such as the very exciting and innovative Ginger Mary brand - well done, Truworhs).

The key to current retailing is all about being the first to market and speedily getting exciting and fresh product out before your competitors do.

It is time for *change!* And this is how I see it being done.

Specialist buyers

First of all we need "specialist" buyers within all categories. Far too often do I still see, for example, a sock buyer moving straight into the position of a specialist glassware buyer within the homewares department. This is obviously done for a variety of reasons whereby a large retailer with a variety of product ranges and brands will put the systems and the knowledge of such before the actual product knowledge.

"Specialist" buyers should be qualified designers in most categories but certainly fashion, homeware, decor and furniture. A qualified designer will have the background and technical knowledge of the products and after the completion of a three year degree, will quickly and efficiently find their way around even the most complex IT systems.

Fablabs

In tandem to this "buying specialist", we need to see the introduction of in-house "Fablabs". Here is a quick overview and process flow of how I see these working.



3D printing in action

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At the heart of this operation is a trends department focusing on what is going to be the next exciting colour palette, as well as the key elements, materials, silhouettes for the future season, whilst having their finger on the pulse of all current products.

It is no longer good enough to simply be looking and subscribing to international trend forecasts. These need to be translated by experienced and trained personnel in order to make them applicable for the local market. A good idea is to consult with external trend professionals before final decisions are made. I still regularly see bad "fashion" decisions being taken, across all product categories, which end up costing retailers dearly.

The next step in this process would be for the actual "Fablab", which would basically look like a modern day design studio with the addition of 3D printers and scanners and include a range of designers, product designers and/or architects who could start translating this information and providing 3D prototypes within record time. BOOM!

It is at this stage of the presentation where most local retailers dig deep for the usual negative responses:

- It's too advanced
- It's too expensive
- We are not a design company
- We don't have the budget for this year
- We don't have the expertise

...In fact the list goes on and if it were up to most of these individuals, fax machines would still be commonplace in their grey walled cubicles. 3D printers are already available locally at a cost of 14k and 3D scanners, substantially cheaper. There are thousands of designers entering the market place and the software is generally cheaper than an excursion overseas.

To put it into perspective and according to my latest calculations, a large retailer could start this process/department from around R300K, and a smaller retailer from around R100K.

With this department set up, products are able to be unique and customised, these samples can be sent all around the world and in most cases, just the files sent whereby they can be printed at any destination. The benefits are immeasurable and this *will* become best practice. The question is, who will get the ball rolling? Who will truly be the first-to-market?

ABOUT DAVE NEMETH

A leading blue chip international company recently identified Dave as one of the top creative influencers in the country. Dave Nemeth is a qualified designer who has held a variety of senior as well as executive positions with some of the countries leading retail groups, spanning a career of twenty years. Email Dave at daven@worldonline.co.za, follow @davenemeth on Twitter and connect on Facebook.

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