

Shortening lead-times to create an agile



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Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a significant transformation that fast fashion has become a key feature in current fashion industry. Although it was regarded as a niche concept offered by a few winners such as Zara and H&M, fast fashion has now been adopted as a key operation mode by many brands in the fashion market (Baker, 2008), using advanced and more efficient supply chains to be more responsive to changing trends towards customer demand. Hence, Fast fashion brands perform relatively better than other fashion brands in various aspects. (Mattila et al. 002: 340 – 351) Esprit is a fashion brand owned by Esprit Holding Ltd. , manufacturing apparel, accessories, footwear and housewares under the Esprit label. In the previous fashion market, Esprit is generally recognized as the originator of fast fashion. As one of the pioneers in the fashion industry, however, Esprit has lost its way in recent years.

(Best Retail Brands, 2012) " In essence, Esprit is a strong and profitable brand, but the brand has gradually lost its soul over the past few years," Ronald Van Der Vis - chief executive of Esprit admitted. News. com. au, 2011) The company is now focused on a brand revival with significant investment planned for marketing and the retail experience, as well as plans to exit some European markets and sell off the U. S. business. (Best Retail Brands, 2012) The most notable action is that the company has appointed Jose Manuel Martinez Gutierrez, who was group director of distribution and operations at Zara, as the CEO position in September 2012. This evidence shows that Esprit is going to struggle with fast fashion leaders like Zara and H&M.

From an operational perspective, agile supply chain strategies have been relatively well studied, and can yield significant value to firms through faster supply chain. (Fisher and Raman 1996) Esprit has started realizing that how to make its products and services to reach customers in the shortest time is most important in today's fashion market. As a result, rapidly changing competitive fashion market and dynamic customer expectations require Esprit to seek agility in its whole supply chain. This paper focuses on the brand reformation in the aspect of creating agile supply chain for Esprit, with an analysis of the key problem that Esprit is currently facing and provide three solutions, which are:

- Designing new products following fashion shows Establishing smaller-scale operational mode
- Using quick response strategy

Literature Review

The conception of fast fashion Fast fashion is a contemporary term used by fashion retailers to acknowledge that designs move from catwalk to store in the fastest time to capture current trends in the market. (Bruce et al. 001) In an operational level, Barnes and Lea-Greenwood (2006) defined “ Fast fashion” as a business strategy which aims to reduce the processes involved in the buying cycle and lead times to get fresh fashion product into stores, in order to satisfy consumer demand. Agile supply chain in fast fashion The supply chain is central to the creation of fast fashion. If suppliers cannot respond quickly enough, inefficiency will occur, and clothing will be unsalable and finally result in the increase of inventory.

Fashion market has been defined that it has four characteristics which are short life-cycles, high volatility, low predictability and high impulse purchasing (Martin et al. 2004), as a result, building up agile supply chain is highly essential in today's fashion market. Bruce et al. (2004) has described agile supply chain that it is shorter, more flexible and demand driven than the normal supply chain. Christopher et al. (2004) pointed out that agile supply chain is driven by information such as market demand and information sharing between businesses in the supply chain. Three critical lead-times According to Martin et al (2004), retailers should concentrate on using different ways to improve the quality of forecast to cope with various uncertainties from the market.

However, because the vitality of market demands, the prediction of forecast will always be accurate in fashion market. As a result, the way of reducing lead-time should be found rather than just relying on the market forecasting. Time-to-market In the highly changeable fashion industry, life cycles of fashion products have been reduced, which means that there is a need for firms to reduce the time-to-market of new products to get market at the fastest speed.

Time-to-market is defined as the length of time taken in product development process from product idea to the finished product. (Garel, 2003) Griffin (2002) used time-to-market to analyze its relationship with the degree of product complexity and originality. In which product complexity and originality were found be related with multifunctional teams and the use of formal process. Sherman et al. (2002) presented that the quantity of people, such as suppliers, top management people and multi-functional

teams who involved in the process is highly associated with time-to-market. It is also important to point out that Martin et al. (2004) has drawn a figure presenting the risk that companies will confront if slow to market.

Time-to-serve According to Martin et al. (2004), time-to-serve could be understood as the time to capture customer's order and deliver the product to retail stores. Time-to-serve applies both principles of lean thinking and just-in-time process to time compression. However, it also inspects the incurring of costs and adding of value with proceeding time. This offers enterprises with a more comprehensive perception where progress can be made in order to reach a higher service levels concerning availability. (Marcelo, 2011) Bergvall-Forsberg and Towers (2007) suggest that sourcing garments closer to consumer markets, particularly in Europe, could shorten the time-to-serve. **Time-to-react**

Time-to-react is one of the lead-times given by Martin et al. (2004), which means the time to adjust the output of the business in response to volatile demand. Because most supply chains are driven by ordering, understanding what customer actually request and do the quick response is a challenge that many fashion retailers are facing. (Martin et al. 2004) Forza and Vinelli (1997: 125) has defined that “ Quick response strategy acts on the single phases/activities throughout the entire chain-right from the producers of yarn up to the sales outlets-with the aim of reducing the time ps that elapse from the textile design stage to the purchasing of the garments by the final consumers”. Time-to-react can be accelerated through the tenet of quick response strategy, which has been divided into three parts: reducing excess

stock from raw material to market, declining the risk of new product forecasting and speeding up the delivery. Birtwistle et al. , 2003)

Problem

After decades of development, Esprit has become a mature, well-known and international fashion brand that offers customers various kinds of fashion products. However, as showed in the annual report of Esprit in 2011, the net profit of Esprit Holding Ltd. was 79 millions, has slumped sharply by 98%, compared with the same period last year. Moreover, Esprit has closed more than 100 physicals stores in the most areas of North America and some areas of Europe and China because its meager sales. (News. com. au, 2011)

These situations directly result in the loss of customers and the damage of its brand image. In the current dilemma of Esprit, Weixiong Cheng, the executive vice-president of ME&CITY, considered that speed and flexibility are the most essential factors in this changeable fashion market, however, with conservative design and sluggish supply chain, Esprit failed to response to ever-changing market needs, whereas the leading fast fashion retailer such as Zara and H&M is struggling to continuously bring fresh fashion goods to customers, which have brought unprecedented competitive pressure to Esprit.

Stephen and Aikaterini (2011) point out that because the fashion industry is characterized by intense and dynamic competition, participants are obliged to develop innovative structures and processes supporting market growth, maintaining competitive advantage and exploiting new product sectors and consumers. Martin et al. (2004) consider that the big gap between traditional fashion and fast fashion is the agility of the supply chain. Esprit puts too

much emphasis on unique brand's image, while ignoring the speed and flexibility in the market. The low-speed of updating new products can't meet consumers demand. So it not only misses the best sales opportunities but also increases the risk of inventory. In this context, Esprit must find some ways to recover.

Solutions

Martin et al (2004) explain that through effectively manage three critical lead-times; the competitive advantage of enterprises can be improved. They are time-to-market, time-to-serve and time-to-react. The speed of Esprit's supply chain could be improved through these three aspects. 4. 1 Design new products following fashion shows The first solution is designing new products following recent fashion shows.

A successful supply chain should be sensitive to the market and response to the product design as soon as possible. Compared with copy the design from other fast fashion brands, depending on fashion shows to design new products will be faster. So the time to design new products will affect the speed of fashion supply chain directly. Yinyin (2010) consider that " fast fashion" is a new term used to describe clothing collections that are based on the most recent fashion trends. It means the popular fashion factors will change rapidly which lead to the short life-circle of fashion products. The product is often ephemeral, designed to capture the mood of the moment: consequently, the period in which it will be saleable is likely to be very short and seasonal, measured in months or even weeks"(Martin et al. 2004). It requires that suppliers should grasp the fashion trends and design new products in short time. Fast fashion companies employ a large number of

designers and buyers; they are responsible for collecting a complete range of fashion information and getting inspiration from fashion shows. Also, Hines and Bruce (2001: 123) state that, the-term trend is closely related to future designs.

The right decision should be made on the design and style of the clothing (Forza and Vinelli, 1997). If a company can catch the first opportunity to reach new market, it would be succeed in sales. With the advances in masscommunication, consumers can easily keep up with the latest fashion trends (Liz and Gaynor, 2006: 260). Mass consumers not just like " cheap"; in fact, they are more interested in " trendy and inexpensive. " For instance, easy chic, and short-term trend is often associated with the popular elements in a particular season, such as a particular color.

Minxun (2012) points out that Esprit makes transition to be a fast fashion brand; the key point is product design that is not only new but also fast. It means Esprit should follow the fashion trends and meets the consumers' demand to design products soon. In order to forecast the consumers taste, the Esprit designers should refer to some famous shows that contain the fashion ideas, trends and colors for the new season's textile designs (David et al. , 2006). Esprit should not following other fashion brands, being the first one to entry new market. 4. Establish smaller-scale operational mode In traditional fashion companies, the total time in manufacture process is considerable which enormously lengthen the order to delivery cycle. The underpinning reason for this long manufacturing time largely lies in the batch-based production and shipping methods. Companies want to pursue cost-minimization and every step is quantities-processed separate from each

other in the total manufacturing process. In previous years, about 80 percent of Esprit's business in Europe is the wholesale rather than retail (Kailath T, 2002).

This led to the European headquarters inclined resources to order-placing meetings. Esprit's order-placing conferences from beginning two times a year became four times a year, until the final 12 times a year, and each time there was three months for lead-time (Kailath T, 2002). The traditional economic batch-quantities methods could truly minimize their costs of manufacturing as well as the costs of shipping. But this viewpoint of cost is too narrow and enterprises would ultimately lose their advantage competitiveness compared with those fast-fashion brands.

Esprit needs to change its existing manufacture and shipping patterns urgently if the company attempts to transform its existing operational system. It must abandon its conventional economies of scale principle both in manufacturing stage and shipping stage. Fast changing, small amount and a high variety of products are commonplace for fast fashion brands. The successful fast fashion brand ZARA, it remains about 30 percent of spare capacity rather than maximizing the use of its productivity (Andres M, 2003).

ZARA gives up the pursuit of economies of scale and takes small quantities of production and distribution methods. Whether ZARA and H & M, an artificially created shortage of supply, not only helps cutting down products' lead-times but also encourages consumers to buy the commodities quickly. Also, small-scale production increased flexibility of the production line in order to better respond to changes of customer needs. If Esprit wants to

transform into a fast fashion brand, it must abandon its conventional bulk production style which just pursuing economies of scale.

The company should cut down its outputs and increase the diversity of products. The adoption of lower output and higher variety of production could help Esprit drive higher service levels in terms of availability within the shortest possible time. Another critical problem in Esprit's supply chain is its shipping time that largely delayed the time-to-serve. Company's former underpinning philosophy of pursuing the economies of scale kept the costs of shipping down to some extent, but may ultimately self-defeating for missing the best sales opportunities and increasing the risk of inventory.

The best way to solve this problem is to accelerate the commodities' transport speed even though sacrifice some cost consideration. Fashion represents to be fast. Take successful fast fashion brand ZARA for example, for the sake that products can be shipped to regions outside of Europe within 48 hours. The company is willing to pay two percent of high airfreight cost price. In France, Germany, Italy, Spain and other EU countries, ZARA transport its products mainly by truck with an average of 36 hours to the chain stores.

The sales in these areas occupy 70 percent of company's total sales. As for the remaining 30 percent of sales, the company sends its products through airway to distant countries and regions such as Asia for the sake of improving the transport speed (Marcelo R, 2011). ZARA's chain stores in China have their separate order rights the same as other stores all over the world, even a section only book one piece of clothing, ZARA could also guarantee to send it to the store within 48 hours (Marcelo R, 2011). If Esprit

wants to reform its operational system and earn much more profits in fashion market, the company must make efforts to curtail the products' shipping time to gain competitive advantages compared with other fashion brands. What's more, the shorter transporting time could help Esprit lower its supply chain risk. Lead-time reduction by "Quick response" strategy Quick response strategy has been adopted by a growing number of fashion retailers in order to improve the company's competitive advantage. Esprit makes sales forecast and then outsources to third parties half a year in advance.

However, the market environment may change during this period; therefore, the lead-time must be shortened in order to risk reduction. Figure 1 Merchandise, data and financial transfer with quick response Source: taken from Quick response in retailing: components and implementation (1995, P. 13) As we can see from figure 1, Customers go to the store to purchase the products or services they need. The purchasing information will be collected, such as style, color, and number. Then this buying information would be sent to vendor for analyzing.

Fernie (1994) suggests that the development of IT technology can ensure the implementation of the quick response strategy. For instance electronic data interchange (EDI). Suppliers manufacture products in accordance with the order requirements, transportation to retail stores through distribution channels. Esprit would be suggested to use the designs of their offshore suppliers. And Esprit buyers will make ultimate selects from these designs. Furthermore, the ultimate decisions making are based on analyzing historical sales data.

In practice, celebrities, pop stars and fashion events have affected the design of the products. In this way, a large amount of money and time will be saved. Quick response strategy gives close attention to an effective and efficient delivery process of goods from suppliers to customers with minimum lead-time. It aims at the high profits, low risk, changing demand and attractive products. The short product life cycle, demand uncertainty and fierce competition are the characteristic of fashion industry. In this environment, market mediation is becoming more and more important. Fisher (1997, P. 07) point out that an accurate prediction makes a good match between the demand and supply of the products.

The ultimate goal of the implementation of the quick response strategy is to meet the customers demand. Therefore, Esprit Buyers and sales staffs should track and analyze recent sales data promptly, so as to recognize the best-selling styles and slow-moving style. For these best-selling items, buyers could inform the supplier's design team to produce similar styles as quick as possible. For those slow-moving items, managers could take markdown or discount strategy, which could relieve the inventory pressures.

In addition, when fashion companies choosing suppliers, the speed and flexibility should be taken into account, not just low cost (Fisher, 1997, P. 108). Esprit could combine local manufacturers with outsourcing to low-cost producers. More specifically, the high-tech products and core products could be manufactured in local factories. As for basic products, they could be produced in low-cost regions. For example, the suppliers of North Africa provide trendy clothing within three weeks at a low price (Birtwistle et al. , 2003) Indeed, multi-sourcing is a good way to outsource.

Furthermore, the relationships among stakeholders influence the effect of the implementation of quick response strategy. On one hand, they are independent of each other; on the other hand, they share information and support each other.

Physically Efficient	Process Market-Responsive	Process	Primary purpose
Supply predictable demand efficiently at the lowest possible cost	Respond quickly to unpredictable demand in order to minimize stock outs, forced markdowns, and obsolete inventory	Manufacturing focus	Maintain high average utilization rate
Deploy excess buffer capacity	Inventory strategy	Generate high turns and minimize inventory throughout the chain	Deploy significant buffer stocks of parts or finished goods
Lead-time focus	Shorten lead time as long as it doesn't increase cost	Invest aggressively in ways to reduce lead time	

Approach choosing suppliers

Select primarily for cost and quality	Select primarily for speed, flexibility, and quality
Product-design strategy	Maximize performance and minimize cost
Use modular design in order to postpone product differentiation	Source: taken from What is the right supply chain for your product? (Fisher, 1997, P. 08)

It can be seen from this chart, buyers concerned about the procurement budgets, discount management and increased margins. Manufactures pay more attention to the volume of orders, production scale, as well as timing. For distributors, the new products must be picked and delivered to consumer precisely, cheaply and as quickly as possible (Birtwistle et al. , 2003). By this way, Esprit would achieve the purpose of inventory reduction and short lead-time, as well as fewer forecast errors.

Advantages and disadvantages Advantages Disadvantages Design new products

Occupy market share firstly and make profits To be the market leader of fast fashion and gain consumer loyalty. 1. New products are risky because of the uncertain forecast.. The complex clothing manufacture lead to the high cost Establish smaller-scale operational mode 1. Decrease the lead-time in supply chain Win more competitive advantages for the company Decrease the risk of supply chain1. Lose the cost advantages that bought by the economies of scale Lose part of the profits Increased product ranges lead to the rising of cost Lead-time reduction by “ Quick response” strategy . Reduce inaccurate forecasts Helping to keep a safety stock Sales and profits will be boost by quick response strategy Consumers’ satisfaction will be improved1. To some extent, the product quality is ignored. Advantages

Advantages of designing new products

First of all, short time-to-market leads to the sales increase. If a company can catch the first opportunity to reach new market, it would occupy the market share in the first time and be successful. Martin et al. (2004) consider that the supplier make the new products early will make greater profits than later.

Otherwise, the early entrant makes much less obsolescent stock. Secondly, early entrant can to be the market leader and gain consumer loyalty. Gabszewicz et al. (1992) indicated that brand loyalty does confer considerable first-mover advantage, consistent with “ hard to follow” results. If the Esprit can design the popular fashion clothing faster than others, it will be stand out in various fast fashion brands. After consumers admiring the fantastic design and amazing speed, it will replace Zara and become the

leader of fast fashion. In long term, consumer loyalty is very important to against the strong competition. . Advantages of establishing smaller-scale operational mode In manufacturing stage, the company should cut down its outputs and increase the types of products. This practice could fundamentally decreases the lead-time in supply chain and wins competitive advantages in this rapidly changing fashion market. While in shipping stage, the adoption of some faster transporting ways such as airways and the establishment of a much quicker delivery system could not only shorten the lead-time but also improve delivery flexibility to cope with various changes.

The shipping system will inevitably occur transportation breakdown due to some unexpected situations such as bad weather conditions. The traditional bulk transportation would unavoidably suffer huge losses when facing such cases. However, the smaller-amount modes of transportation can minimize such losses to a certain extent. Advantages of quick response strategy Esprit will benefit lot from quick response strategy. Firstly, it can reduce inaccurate forecasts base on the previous sales data. Secondly, it could be very helpful to keep a safety stock. Thirdly, sales and profits will be boost by this strategy. Last but not least, consumer satisfaction will be improved. These benefits will enhance the competitive advantage.

Disadvantages

Disadvantages of designing new products following fashion shows Shelby, H (2011) consider that the new product innovation is risky comes from the observation that only a fraction of new products become commercial success. Even though the new products are design depending on the consumers demand, it is hard to collect all the consumers' hobby. On the

other word, sometimes the survey data shows only represent a part of consumers' taste.

It is very difficult to make sure that others are willing to buy the new products. “ It has been estimated, for instance, that between 60 and 90 percent of new products end their totally withdrawn or left unsupported” (Booz et al, 1968). So it has a high risk to be the number one or the fastest one which produce the new design clothing. Yen et al (2011) points that with the increasing number of new products introduced more frequently as well as the smaller volumes per product, the pool of skills required for clothing manufacturing is becoming more complex. It leads to high-cost as the result.

For the different new design clothing, suppliers should change the supply chain frequently. That will cost a lot and can't sell in high price that result in making little profit. Disadvantages of establishing smaller-scale operational mode The solutions showed above in time-to-serve part are not without their inherent shortcomings. First of all, the company would lose its cost advantage that bought by the economies of scale. Then, because of the lower yields, company's production may not be able to meet the demand of the market. As a result, Esprit may lose this part of profits.

Last but not least, company has to invest much more money to diversify company's product range as well as create a much quicker transportation system. All these innovations would average up products' costs ultimately. 5. 2. 3 Disadvantage of quick response strategy Quick response strategy emphasizes particularly on fast and effective. To some extent, the product quality is ignored. For instance, the multi-sourcing is difficult to guarantee

uniform quality, and inevitably rejects into the market, that would lead to customer dissatisfaction and the frequently returns. 6. Comparison

Similarities

Differences Design new products VS Establish smaller-scale operational mode 1. Shorten the lead-times Average up the cost of products Different influence on risk Establish smaller-scale operational mode VS “ Quick response” strategy 1. Speed up the distribution cycle . Improve consumers’ satisfaction Decrease inventory risk Different influence on cost Design new products VS “ Quick response” strategy . Boost sales and margins Enhance the brand loyalty Different influence on risk 6. 1Design new products VS Establish smaller-scale operational mode There are some similarities between these two solutions. On the one hand, both of them aim at shorten the lead-times in the supply chain. On the other hand, the two solutions would average up the cost of products. The obvious difference between these two solutions is the influence on risk. The solution proposed in time-to-market part would increase the products’ risk, while in another solution, supply chain’s risk would be reduced. 6. 2Establish smaller-scale operational mode VS “ Quick response” strategy The similarities between Time-to-serve and Time-to-react can be presented in three aspects.

Fundamentally, these two solutions all speed up the distribution cycle that from manufacturing to the end-customers. Next, consumers’ satisfaction would be improved. Last, they all could help Esprit to decrease inventory risk. Their main difference lies in cost. Solution proposed in Time-to-serve section would cut down company’s cost while another one would increase it.

6. 3Design new products VS “ Quick response” strategy The brand loyalty

would be enhanced by these two methods. In addition to this, the sales and margins would be boosted. These advantages would make the company stand out in various fashion brands.

As the mentioned former solution above that there is a hazard about the risky new products. Nevertheless, the later one lowers the risk of products management. 7. Conclusion In this paper, fashion supply systems are characterized by three critical lead-times: time-to-market, time-to-serve and time-to-react, which are highly essential to building up an agile supply chain. However, in the consideration of the current fast fashion industry and the today's situation of Esprit, how to react to the target market in the right time is a priority that Esprit should mainly focus on.

As apparel markets have become more varied and changeable in the present retail environment, there is a transition from a production-driven to a market-driven approach in the fashion industry. (Bhardwaj, 2009) Hence, in order to survive, Esprit has to sustain competitive objectives by ensuring the brand meet the market demand. The quick repose strategy is a must for Esprit to equip it with agility to fight against the leading fast fashion brands at its first step.

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