



# PLM: Retail Innovation Enabler

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## PLM: Retail Innovation Enabler

Apparel designers often presume that the introduction of a product lifecycle management (PLM) system will constrain the creative process.

The reasons for this sentiment vary. Some believe that using a product development process and technology tool will restrict creativity and spontaneous thinking, while others think the process of moving over to a PLM system will be overly burdensome.

The truth is, today's PLM systems are enabling more, not less, innovation for apparel companies. These solutions provide a framework that allows for clearer communication and greater collaboration through all product development phases, from initial design through production, which can more than justify the IT investment.

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## Initial Design

When working on the initial design of any apparel product, designers go through the process of sharing ideas with colleagues. During this phase of product development, one of the greatest challenges for designers is keeping track of the latest product sketches, along with all of their colleagues' comments and corrections.

The root of this challenge usually traces back to a lack of an appropriate platform that is tailored for initial design collaboration. Sketches and feedback can get lost when email is used as the primary collaboration tool. If a design team is exchanging multiple emails with attachments, feedback and comments, it's easy to start making corrections to the wrong version of a product design, or lose track of colleagues' comments when drafting a new sketch.

PLM systems enable innovation during the initial design phase by allowing designers to find, edit and provide feedback on a design with little confusion. By posting all sketches and comments in one centralized location, designers are able to focus on the creative process rather than worrying about whether they are working off of the most recent version of the design.

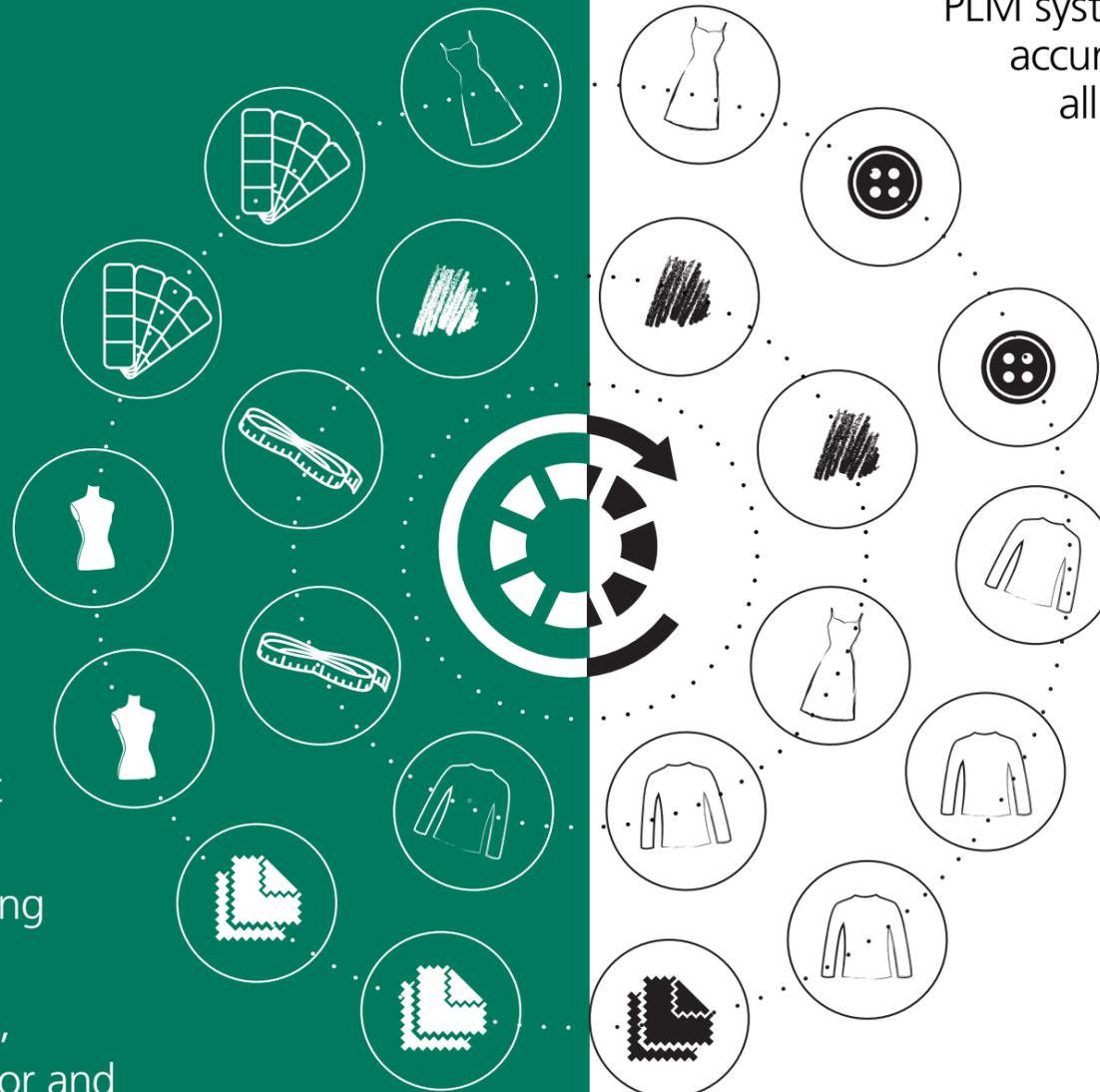
Some PLM systems can even improve innovation by allowing designers to take pictures on mobile devices like iPads or other mobile tablets during fashion shows, world tour, or other apparel events, upload the picture directly to their PLM system from their mobile device and start collaborating with other designers in the system right away. This is a huge advantage for designers who are often traveling and want to capture and share their ideas with colleagues on the go.



# Collaboration with extended development teams

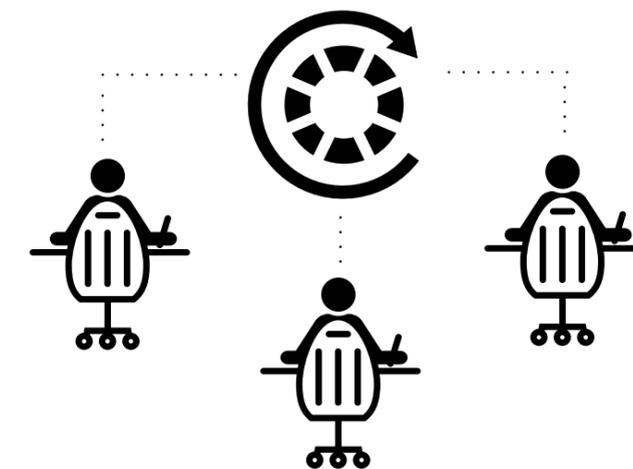
Innovation does not end after the initial design phase. Even after a design team believes they have created a design that is new and exciting, the design must be moved through the product development process in a way that ensures the innovation becomes a reality. This is where the strengths of a comprehensive PLM tool really shine.

One of the biggest challenges of the apparel product development process is facilitating communication between the large number of teams involved in different stages of the project. Cross-functional development can occur between 20 or more teams, including those focusing on fabric development, color and print development, fit development, finish development, product management, merchants, creative design, technical design, material color and sample development, testing, sourcing costing, quality, regulatory and compliance, production, brand marketing and sales, and others.



With an apparel product development process that involves so many different groups, each having different roles and needs for collaborating cross-functionally, product development requires a robust communications and management platform tailored to the apparel industry's needs.

PLM systems are crucial for ensuring that an innovative design is accurately reflected in the final product, as these systems allow all teams involved to have access to the information they need from a single source of truth. By having complete, up to date information related to the product in one central place – from material color samples to construction sets – teams can easily view the information they need and collaborate throughout the product development process. PLM systems help the product development team spend less time trying to find the information they need, and more time focusing on product creation across the development cycle.





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## Supplier Collaboration

Even after an apparel product has been through the product development phase, PLM solutions play a crucial role in ensuring that the product is mass-produced to the appropriate specifications.

For many apparel brands, a single supplier cannot always fulfill large orders for a particular product. In these cases, apparel companies must work with multiple suppliers to fill their orders. There are many difficulties associated with this task. Instructions for both automated and manual production must be produced to meet each supplier's language needs. Apparel companies need to take into account variances in the supplier's production processes to ensure that they all produce the product to the exact same specifications. Costs of production in each factory may vary and it impacts the margins.

The RFQ (request for quote) process and vendor negotiation are other areas which traditionally rely on email and phone communication in apparel industry. It becomes a challenge to ensure that the vendor is providing their quote based on the latest product specification. Another RFQ-related challenge is effectively capturing and reviewing vendor comments during the negotiation using emails and phone calls. This problem is magnified when multiple sourcing managers are negotiating with multiple vendors. It is not hard to imagine communication gaps with the supplier base resulting in products and costs that are not in line with needs and expectations.

## PLM systems help address all of these challenges.

Through PLM systems, apparel companies can quickly and easily distribute final product specifications (commonly known as tech packs) in different languages, account for variances in manufacturing processes among different factories and monitor the materials being used for production. If a product is not being produced according to the apparel company's specifications, PLM systems allow companies to quickly identify and correct the pain points in the manufacturing process. Facilitating communication between teams can smooth the entire process, from RFQ to production.



## Conclusion

The definition of "innovation" for apparel companies needs to expand to include both the creation of new and enhancement of exciting designs, and the ability to make that design a reality. Many apparel companies are beginning to realize that PLM systems are critical tools that support and improve both types of innovation. By enhancing collaboration during the initial design process, providing single source of truth for data accuracy and integrity, and providing the necessary communication tools that ensure the design is accurately reflected in the final product, PLM systems are proving to be a true innovation enabler for apparel companies..



## About the Author

**Vipin Goyal** has served clients across multiple industries, developing and implementing strategic PLM solutions that incorporate process improvements, integration with supply chain, and enterprise software applications.

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