



WHAT WE STAND FOR IS AT THE HEART OF OUR DECISIONS – THAT'S WHAT MATTERS TO OUR CUSTOMERS



Fashion: it's a complicated business and one at which John Lewis works very hard, reports Dalia Dawood

PHOTOS: MARK MACKENZIE

Fashion is a difficult word. It's not just about wearing clothes you like or clinging to the catwalk trends – it's about identity, both the customer's and the brand's. That's what Clea Sullivan, Design Manager, Menswear and Childrenswear, tells me. She and Iain Ewing, her counterpart in Womenswear and Women's Accessories, are responsible for the teams who create that identity for John Lewis's own-brand fashion assortments by designing and developing them in-house.

Spring/Summer 2015 (SS15 in short) own-label collections have begun to arrive, splashing colour and sunny promise into JL shops, but before the ranges reached the rails their vibrant colours and exotic prints were created, developed, negotiated and approved by teams of Partners in Design and Buying departments at John Lewis's Victoria Street head offices in London.

We're with the brand

The unwritten rule both teams live by: reflect our customers' values through the brand. Why does it matter? Because it's the basis for our own-brand success, says Clea: "What we stand for is at the heart of our decisions – that's what matters to our customers." Every layer of the 'process' for creating the clothes rests on this ethos, but how does it start? With ideas. "We work on a season a year in advance," says Iain, "and have a date set in the diary when we get

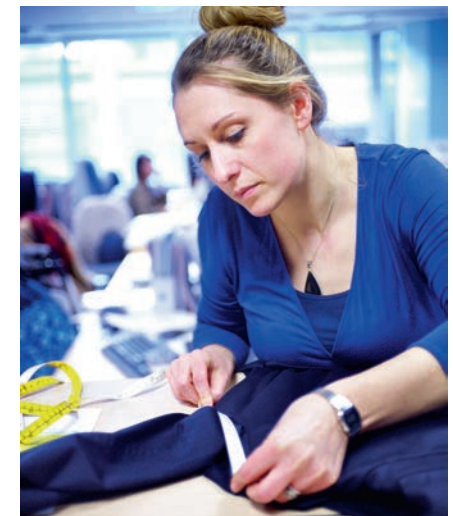


"WE WORK ON A SEASON A YEAR IN ADVANCE AND HAVE A DATE SET IN THE DIARY WHEN WE GET AROUND A TABLE AND THROW OUT IDEAS ABOUT WHERE FASHION IS GOING..."

Iain Ewing, Design Manager, Womenswear and Women's Accessories

around a table and throw out ideas about where fashion's going, but that's not the starting point – we're constantly collecting information and inspiration throughout the year." However, it's as much about looking back at the sales as it is looking forward to the trends, he says. "We've got to react to trade and learn the lessons from what has or hasn't sold well, which also informs our decisions."

Colours and patterns, fabrics and shapes: every detail of the garments is considered and meticulously researched, before being collated into trend books. And inspiration comes from everywhere. "We'll go to textile fairs, trend shows and fabric exhibitions in Paris and Florence for inspiration," says Danielle Jephson, Assistant Buyer, Men's Own Brand Casualwear Buying. "We see new fabrics from mill houses and collections that fit in with our trends,



CLOCKWISE: Francesca Birkhead and Iain Ewing (both Design); Rebecca Fisher and Kim Humphris (both Womenswear Own Brand Buying)

and work with our designers to make them commercial and right for our brands." This happens at design presentation meetings, where designers will set out the vision for the next season to buyers, based on the info and inspo they've gathered.

What's hot

SS15's fashion muse, for example, has travelled from the Italian Riviera to Miami to the South American beaches, collecting tropical colours, prints and textures along the way that have been reworked to suit a John Lewis audience.

Catwalks and fashion shows have inspired some of these ideas, helping paint a picture of what's coming on trend, but actual painted pictures have been a source of inspiration, too. Strokes of bold colour on fabrics and prints that appear painted or hand made resonate through





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Clea Sullivan, Design Manager, Menswear and Childrenswear

Womenswear's floral and painterly themes, which Iain tells me are partly influenced by last year's David Hockney and Matisse exhibitions in London.

Clea also points out that a floral print taken from the Partnership's own archives, dipped in different shades of blue, has blossomed across a range of men's casualwear (see box, opposite).

What I learn is that not every up-and-coming trend is appropriate for John Lewis, and that goes back to protecting the all-important brand identity. As Clea says: "Certain trends will work for us and others won't. We're the gatekeepers of the brand

and what we allow into our assortments has to be right for our customers."

Loyal customers

The customer base, like the John Lewis 'brand mix', is varied: each sub-brand caters for a different type of customer with a specific style, which is a way of keeping what Kim Humphris, Womenswear Buyer, JL Separates, Collection Weekend, Outerwear and Occasionwear, calls the 'brand loyalty'. "Our customer feels safe in our hands and trusts us to dress her well. We'll do that by knowing what she wants and catering to her tastes."

She explains that among Womenswear's

CLOCKWISE: Jodie Campbell and Danielle Jephson (Menswear Own Brand Buying); Camilla Honey (Design); the Womenswear Design team at work; Clea Sullivan (Menswear Design); Helen Ashton, Sophie Lauder and Amy Jones (Womenswear Design); Hannah Richardson (Menswear Own Brand Buying); Lucy Parkyn (Men's Branded Buying)

own-brand range is Capsule, which is a 'considered collection of timeless, smart-casual separates aimed at the new classic customer'. Collection Weekend is a 'contemporary casual range that's colourful, fashionable and feminine', while Kin is 'the most directional' own-brand range that has a 'contemporary, formal aesthetic'. "Each offers something exciting that's been carefully considered." The rules differ slightly for Menswear's brands – Kin, John Lewis Man and JL & Co. – dividing its three audiences according to lifestyle and fit, says Assistant Buyer Danielle. "Kin has a cleaner, slimmer silhouette, Man has more of a relaxed fit and JL & Co. is masculine and premium, which is reflected from the fabrics used to the ticketing. For each, our decisions are focused on the customer; it's not about our personal tastes but what he wants."

Dedicated designers

Refining ideas and selecting themes are collective team efforts, but each assortment's

identity is in the hands (and sketchbooks) of designated designers. One, for example, generates Womenswear's entire own-brand knitwear (they make up 72% of cash sales on core ranges) says Iain, sketching artworks, working on colour palettes and liaising with buyers on the final 'look' of the pieces. "Own brand has grown massively in the past few years and that directly relates to having designated designers," says Clea. "It's their knowledge that informs the signature looks that make our customers want to come back and buy." Kim agrees, adding that the integrity of designers' ideas is 'very important'.

And just as important is evolving those ideas to 'excite customers'. "Giving them a new reason to buy from us each season is key. They demand that of us, so we can't stand still too much," she continues, but is quick to mention this is balanced by protecting staple, popular pieces that carry into new seasons. It's a 'tricky balance between history and newness', say Iain and Clea. Each season brings a 'new story' that needs to be told differently each time. "Our customers don't buy into history any more, they constantly want a fresh story," Clea says. "Your bestseller from last year isn't good enough, so the challenge is how to put a new spin on something." The good news, adds Iain, is 'everything can look different' provided it's given a new treatment.

Before it's told to customers, the 'fresh story' is shared with the Heads of Buying and Merchandising in assortment reviews (meetings where the collections for each brand are signed off), meaning buyers can start to agree delivery dates and negotiate prices with suppliers, striking

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Sometimes you have to look back to move forwards, which is exactly what Partners in Design have been doing for years, turning to the wealth of inspiration available in the Partnership's archives for fashion creations.



Tens of thousands of prints are housed inside the Heritage Centre at Odney, many of which have directly influenced what appears on the shopfloor. An example that's already on the shelves, part of Menswear's SS15 range: a floral archive print stamped on men's swim shorts (pictured), summer shirts and hat, first produced in 1894 by Stead McAlpin for a company called W O'Hanion. It is, says Clea, the perfect print to reflect the sunny, South American theme drenching the season's own-brand collections. "It speaks of the beautiful flowers you'd find in the South American jungles, which fits our theme perfectly. It's floral in a masculine way and has a premium beauty that we translated on a number of different garments. It's important that a print has a relevant narrative that blends with the trend."

That's how just one print has been used – Clea says her team may use up to 300 prints per season as inspiration and it's the same for Womenswear. As Iain explains, up to 70% of the prints in core casualwear come from the archives. "Drawing from our heritage to tell new stories is an invaluable resource. There's so much there!"

the balance between value and quality. "Cost negotiations are crucial to making a profit, and good value and the right fabric quality are rooted in our ethos", Kim says, so offering a different price point can help John Lewis stand out among the competition.

Once samples of the garments have been fitted onto models to ensure the proportions are correct and 'lab dips' – the shade and tone of the colours – have been approved, the next stage of the buying cycle is placing bulk orders, which have to be delivered to strict deadlines to reach their final destination: the shopfloor. It's here that the assortments can 'anchor themselves as brands in their own right' alongside other branded ranges, says Danielle.

Fashion forward

This may be the final chapter of the story, but it's not the last page: buying teams will continue to monitor the sales of a current season while working on the next one and liaising with selling Partners so the 'vision' trickles through to the shopfloor. Danielle describes buyers' relationship with selling Partners as 'collaborative', adding: "They're very good at supporting us. They know their products and give us feedback that helps us assess how we're doing."

So how does the story end? You could say it doesn't, really, as the current season's sales will impact how the next one will look. As Kim puts it: "We can't say 'goodbye' to a season until those lines go into markdown. Even now, we're still learning the lessons from last season's sales. The cycle stays with us and plays a part in what we'll do next to both delight and excite our customers and expand as a fashion forward brand." 📌



OTHER BRANDS ARE AVAILABLE

Own brand is a profitable and growing area of our fashion output, but the way most people tend to spend is by 'cross-shopping' – ie, buying from more than one brand. Filling John Lewis's fashion footprint with an eclectic mix of brands is how the division retains the credibility of its fashion offer and that's where branded buying teams step in.

Lucy Parkyn, Assistant Buyer, Men's Branded Casualwear Buying (pictured), explains the process behind buying branded fashion. "We plan our strategy and then set out a budget by brand, based on their performance against last year's budgets," she says. As with own brand, there's a need to reflect on the previous season's sales, which plays into buying decisions along with trends gleaned from fashion trade shows and competitors. "We keep these in mind at our buy appointments, where the brands present their key pieces and trends, and we'll range build from this." She adds: "The JL Menswear of old would play it safe, but we want to grow our commercial, contemporary fashion with exciting brands offering something different."

How does she select from the hundreds of pieces without replicating across brands? "We have a good dialogue across our teams to ensure there's no duplication. It's important to buy what we know will be popular and buy into each brand's trends to reflect their identities, but it's ultimately all about the customer – we represent him and what he wants when we buy, and that also means introducing something new and fresh."

