

Training Current and Future Employees of Apparel Companies to Think Like the Customer

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ABSTRACT

Employees at apparel companies often come from various backgrounds and are hired or promoted into the merchandising area. With similar academic backgrounds, merchandising students are usually required to take a variety of courses across multiple disciplines. Integrating this diverse information for critical thinking applications is the goal of our cross-discipline curriculum. Although deemed important by industry, engagement with course information by students, who are either incumbent employees or recent graduates, requires training and practice. We observed that incumbent industry employees as well as students in junior and senior level merchandising classes were having difficulty integrating concepts from various company departments or university classes in order to solve everyday retail problems typically encountered by buyers and other retail customers. Implementation of our innovative teaching strategy involved the renovation of a course. Data from student assessment sources indicate that students, both company employees and merchandising majors, enjoyed conducting the research and using content from previous company positions or university classes. Additionally, the data indicated that these students now feel confident in working with retail math formulas in combination with merchandising principles. Retailers and other employers of the students inform us about how impressed they are with the students and their engagement and assimilation of the vast variety of concepts needed for success in the competitive apparel company.

Keywords: Merchandising, Buyer, Retail

Introduction

In a competitive environment companies make use of many and diverse strategies,

often in combination, to achieve a market advantage. One strategy being used by many apparel companies is supply chain

management (SCM). These companies examine and work to control their supply chain to maintain efficiency of sourcing, distribution, and sales (Fawcett, Magnan, & McCarter, 2008). To perform well while using this strategy, companies must understand both their suppliers and their customers. Combined with SCM, companies are also using customer-centric strategies to better understand the operations and demands of their customers. When a customer is well understood, the customer can be better served and is more likely to remain faithful to the vendor (Kincade & Gibson, 2010). For apparel companies, these customers are the millions of retailers, both chains and independents, which sell goods to the final consumer.

In addition to the adoption and maintenance of SCM and customer-centric strategies, many apparel companies are being encouraged by industry analysts to move from cut, make and trim (CMT) operations to full package programs where apparel companies manage both the sourcing of the raw materials as well as the production of the final product (“The clothing industry,” 2009). As companies make this transition from isolated operations to an integrated supply chain, they need employees who not only understand this transition but who also understand the customer. Incumbent employees and new hires need to be trained to operate effectively in this new company environment (Chan, Taylor, & Ip, 2009; Kayakutlu & Buyukozkan, 2010). To meet the challenges of the new learner, the competitive environment, and the operational strategies of apparel companies, trainers and instructors must design curriculum and training programs, whether at the university or within the company, that are experiential, client based, and technology sensitive (Chan, Taylor, & Ip; Shepherd, 2010).

The merchandising area is one of the most critical units within the company because this is the interface where the apparel company employees have the most contact

with the retail customer. Employee training and preparation in this area can be most critical; however, many companies hire new employees from diverse backgrounds or use an internal promotion program that draws employees from various backgrounds from within the firm. Either hiring strategy results in employees, with the least knowledge of the customer and the product, moving into the merchandising area. For example, employees coming from sourcing may understand the suppliers and time tables of ordering raw materials but not understand the buying selling cycle of the retail customer. Employees coming from marketing may use the Ten Ps (i.e., product, placement, price, promotion, people, packaging, presentation, positioning, processing, playback) in their work with little knowledge of apparel or other sewn products.

A similar disconnect between employee background and company needs also exists with new hires from some merchandising programs. In most universities, merchandising students are required to take courses in marketing, merchandising and other disciplines. They learn about consumer behavior either in a marketing class or a merchandising class. In other curriculum areas, they will have courses in general management, accounting, finance, store management, personnel, and economics. Each course gives them basic information, tools and principles; however, no course in a traditionally structured curriculum gives them an integrated view of the information with experiential application. Additionally most courses rarely get beyond the level of identify or explain in the hierarchy of learning objectives taxonomy. The result for in house training or university teaching is that students learn the facts but have limited experiential learning until they are *on the job*, which is often too late for success.

Instructors, both in industry and in academia, know that students need to see information, hear information and use information for it to be truly learned;

however, many times, instructors are often not able to introduce experiences in class to achieve these higher levels of learning. In contrast, employers, field study supervisors, and career service personnel report that students will need to be integrated and insightful thinkers when they are on the job as a merchandiser. Merchandisers must attend to a variety of tasks throughout every day, and these tasks are multi-faceted, using all the information that students encounter in their classes – retail math, personnel management, trade policies, consumer behavior and numerous other diverse course and topic areas, such as textiles and quality. Problem solving has been and continues to be listed by many employers as one of their top skills sought when interviewing job applicants for merchandising positions (e.g., Chaker, 2006; Eckman & Frey, 2006; Frazier, 2004; Ma & Chen, 2009; McCuaig, Lee, Barker, & Johnson, 1996).

Statement of the Problem

Whether designing an in-house training program or restructuring university curriculum, integrating a curriculum full of information for critical thinking applications is the goal of a cross-discipline curriculum. Engagement with course information requires training and practice. Educators recognize that students often do not receive this type of training in most college courses and need explanations of how concepts in one course relate to similar principles and theories in other courses. Students must be taught how to think analytically or how to draw upon the information that they have learned and to use that information in new problem solving situations (Eckman & Frey, 2006; Ma & Chen, 2009; Mimbs, 2005; Shepherd, 2010). Specifically within the merchandising curriculum, students need to be taught how to identify which merchandising concepts, financial and managerial skills or mathematical retail formulas are needed to make good buying decisions. In addition, they need time and experiences to practice this technique in order to make it part of their skill set before entering the world of work. Actively doing

research becomes an important tool in achieving this level of learning (Chen, Woodard, Carroll, & Alexander, 2005; Ma & Chen, 2009).

The need for this type of training became evident to us through three venues. First, we observed that students in junior and senior level merchandising classes were having difficulty integrating concepts from various classes in order to solve everyday retail problems typically encountered by buyers. Second, we had students, applying for industry internships and seniors interviewing for jobs, who were constantly requesting information on how to combine concepts from various classes to answer merchandising and other critical thinking questions during the interview process. For example, retailers and apparel companies require our seniors who are interviewing for entry level positions to complete retail math quizzes or to discuss the justification of specific mathematical formulas for finding solutions to solve everyday retail problems. Third, we were contacted by management personnel from several apparel companies requesting instructors to teach in-house courses on *how to think like a customer*. In addition, we have alumni who are making career moves who email us and want a refresher course in retail math solutions, specification writing or other industry applications.

Application of subject matter concepts to retail problems for merchandising solutions is highlighted by the Chief Executive Officer, William L. McComb, at the newly reorganized business structure of Liz Claiborne Inc., one of the major apparel companies in the United States. He summarized the importance of all employees thinking like a buyer when he described the new direction at Liz Claiborne Inc. Mr. McComb explained: “we are also developing a best-in-class retail capability and will no longer operate our retail brands through the lens of a wholesale business, but rather view and operate all of our brands with the mindset and muscle of a specialty

retailer” (“Press Release Liz Claiborne Inc.,” 2007). This same idea was a central point for Marshal Cohen’s presentation in February 2010 at the SGS-Sponsored MAGIC presentation. Cohen, chief industry analyst at THE NPD Group discussed how the apparel supply chain must be consumer-centric in all aspects of its operation (“SGS consumer testing,” 2010). Everyone in the supply chain must understand the other side of the wall. *Throwing the product over the wall* for someone else to finish, an old attitude in this often traditional-oriented industry, is no longer possible if a company wishes to succeed. Employees, new and old, must understand the other side of that wall or supplier to customer interface.

Purpose and Objectives

The major objective of this innovative teaching strategy was to create a course providing an integrated framework to meet the needs of this diverse audience. The course was designed so that students, both employees at an apparel company and merchandising majors at our universities, could understand how merchandising concepts, managerial decision-making processes, and mathematical formulas are interrelated and used simultaneously in retail operations. Thus, all students could build a sound background upon which to solve everyday retail problems for a profitable bottom line in the real world of business. Students (i.e., current and future employees) engaged with learning and trained to this level of analytical thinking are more beneficial to employers and are more likely hired by major corporate recruiters (A. Abron, Belk Stores, Inc, personal communication, 2007).

Background

The job of the merchandiser is multifaceted, fast paced, demanding, and continually changing, and requires just the right high energy level and fashion oriented person (Gordon, 2006). In a review of the job listings, with job descriptions and responsibilities, in *Women’s Wear Daily* or *Daily News Record* and in discussions with

retail recruiters, we found that the merchandiser, whether working for an apparel company or for a retailer, must have basic knowledge from numerous fields including mathematics, marketing, consumer behavior, merchandising, and economics as well as product knowledge. They must also possess the skills to combine and use this knowledge with judgment, flexibility and decisiveness. This recent qualitative data is substantiated through numerous research studies. Over the years many researchers have examined the merchandising curriculum with feedback from retailers, alumni and faculty. These studies range from the early studies in the 1980s that were often used to justify the major (e.g., Avery, 1989; Kean, 1985-1986) through the validation studies in the 1990s (e.g., Arnold & Forney, 1998; McCuaig, et al., 1996; Rolling & Burnett, 1998) to studies published in the 2005 focused issue (Volume 23) of the *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. A number of these studies examine and update curriculum for technology applications (e.g., Foster, 2005; Slocum & Beard, 2005).

Not only is experiential learning important to apparel companies but strengthening student learning is in line with the recent addition of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to the documents of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). SACS (2010) is the regional accrediting body for universities and colleges in the U.S. southern states. The association covers institutions of higher learning in 11 states that award associate, baccalaureate, master’s or doctoral degrees. Similar associations provide accreditation for higher education institutions throughout the United States. The accreditation process is a lengthy and intensive process that covers all aspects of the institution from libraries to class rooms. The *Handbook for Institutions Seeking Reaffirmation*, used by universities that are seeking continuation of their accreditation status, is a lengthy document that lists many areas for compliance – the QEP was added

to these principles as of January 2007 (SACS, 2008).

The QEP standard is in place to encourage colleges and universities to identify key issues that represent broad-based institutional inquiry and are based on institutional assessment. The QEP Standard is designed in order to enhance learning to assist students become comprehensive and integrative thinkers. Our universities have taken the directive of the QEP and developed components of the accreditation process that confirm the universities' commitment to student learning ("Learning in A Technology," 2010; "SACS-COC Reaffirmation of Accreditation," 2010). Both of these universities have provided leadership in showing others how to create the cross-disciplined and integrated curriculum that will support students in being not only learners but engaged learners. Specifically, XXX University has developed a program that focuses on Learning in a Technology-Rich Environment (LITRE), which emphasizes a learning-oriented culture enriched with tools, facilities, and infrastructure to support classroom and lifelong learning ("Learning in A Technology," 2010). Meanwhile, YYY University has developed a QEP that focuses on the student's experience on campus, as an integrated whole bringing together the skills of problem solving and inquiry, and lifelong learning ("SACS-COC Reaffirmation of Accreditation," 2010).

Important to the success of engagement are several underlying principles: (a) broad based involvement is accomplished by all stakeholders in the development of the curriculum, (b) a focus on learning outcomes provide an environment that supports student learning, (c) adherence is kept to the mission of the institution, (d) goals and a plan are clearly identified, and (e) assessment is performed and feedback is used (SACS, 2008). These principles and our universities' QEP programs form a theoretical and practical foundation for our newly designed merchandising course.

Engagement of students for long term absorption of information, regardless of learning styles, requires some form of experiential learning including activities that allow them to achieve learning beyond the simple act of discovering or taking in and organizing information (Bickle, Carroll, & McKenna, 2005; Rowley, Jensen, & Rowley, 2005). Students, as industry employees or as merchandising majors, need to achieve the learning levels of processing information and making decisions using the information for success in a competitive apparel company.

Implementation of the Teaching Strategy

Implementation of this innovative teaching strategy, using experiential learning with application of process and a focus on customer, involved the renovation of a merchandising course. With limitations on resources, growing enrollments, and sensitivity to hours and years to matriculate, the best option to adding this engagement experience for students was to take an existing course and renovate it to achieve the goals of QEP. Both of us were teaching a similar course and needed to restructure to meet these university directives. In joint planning, we divided the course into four segments during the renovation. At each segment, information from previous classes was identified as pertinent to the segment. When teaching either a training course for industry or our university course, we note to our students this use of previous information, reminding students that information from Department X or Y in industry or Class X or Class Y in the university is needed as background to this activity.

Segment One – Evaluating the Retail Environment

To improve critical thinking, the introductory segment of the experiential course consists of investigating the current state of retailing. With our students, we engaged in pinpointing how retail math and management are impacted by events in various distribution channels throughout the

entire supply chain. The segment starts with a review of retail types and store formats, retail functions, and retail organizations and their positioning in the supply chain (topics addressed in the introduction to merchandising or retailing class). Some review or restatement of information is needed because students may have had various instructors for a previous course or have had the course at various semesters. Within industry classes, we ask students to relay information about their previous positions or experiences. Re-teaching the information is not done – only refreshing students' memories is desired. For quick reviews and to emphasize the importance of knowing both previous information and current industry events, we use a *Current Events in the Fiber/Textile/Apparel/Retail (FTAR) Complex* pre-quiz. This type of quiz challenges students to investigate the latest happenings in each segment of the supply chain and to review the major countries for sourcing product.

In challenging students to locate information about recent apparel, textiles, fashion, and retail trends, we assign specific topics for brief in-class reports. Topics, to research in journals, newspapers or periodicals, might cover the following information areas: the explosive growth in offshore apparel manufacturing and supply chain management; the use of high-tech, nanotech and smart fabrics in apparel and home furnishings; bricks, clicks, catalogs and Internet sales, or entertainment-based retailing including lifestyle shopping centers and the rise of showcase stores. During a specified class period, reports on the research of these topics are shared by student panels who present their research information to all students in the class. When the class is large or for a change of pace the topics can be delivered as a *pairs share*, where two teams meet in a small group and share their information with each other. At this time, the instructor relates how the information will be utilized in the class. Not only do students grasp a quick review of what is happening in the industry and how

this information will impact the retail math class, but they also earn extra points for completing the pre-quiz or have an opportunity to participate in a practice exercise for developing skills to give professional presentations (i.e., panels and individual oral presentations, visuals, written summaries, critiques, brief research papers). These exercises set the standards and benchmarks for course evaluation and also provide our students with a concise summary of previous or updated information needed to complete other course activities. After the course has been taught several semesters, university students quickly learn that they need to keep their textbooks and notes from previous classes. All students learn the benefits of team work because of the synergy gained from collective memory. After the brief review, the class quickly moves to application of this information.

Student teams are formed and begin to conduct research in trade journals (e.g., *Stores* – especially the July and August issues) and publications from consulting firms (e.g., The NPD Group, Inc., Plunkett Research, Ltd.). Use of informational resources, which are available to and used by merchandisers on the job, is essential for encouraging student engagement. With the growing availability of electronic databases through the university libraries, this access to information is becoming easier for university students and continues to support their preparation to think as merchandisers. Dialog with faculty, alumni, and other industry personnel show that electronic access to information is basic to the job of a merchandiser (Hines, Broughton, Swinker, & Frey, 2003). Students, who are employees at apparel companies, are encouraged to seek resources available to them through the company and to explore resources generally available on the internet. In addition, alumni of our programs are reminded that they can continue to access some resources at the university.

These student employees are also required to perform informational interviews with

selected, company-approved customers, or for university students, instructor-approved retailers. Student teams must follow a three step process in getting an instructor-approved customer or retailer. First, the team must check with us that no other team has requested the customer. Students, in apparel-company training, may need an additional approval from their managers to seek direct contact with customers for these projects. Second a student in each team must contact the customer or retailer and discuss the project. For this process we encourage our students to share the course information with the customer or retailer. Third, someone from each team must provide us with written confirmation that their customer/retailer has agreed to participate and provide us with contact information for the customer/retailer.

As the university students form their teams, we encourage them to consider who has a contact with a retailer. Again, students learn to think like retail customers (e.g., buyers) who are part of hardworking and fast paced teams. Apparel company employees are often located some distance from their customers and must use emails or phone calls. For universities and colleges that are located away from major cities, contact with the retailer can also be performed through computer technology. In addition, we found that university students often go home or travel during the semester and have the opportunity to meet their retailer in face-to-face situations, and apparel company employees may travel to or have other ready contact with their customers. Involvement of university students with local businesses is an excellent method for engaging students in the field, involving the stakeholders in the curriculum, and building good community relationships between the community and the university. Instructors, especially those at universities located in small towns, will want to monitor and control access to retailers to prevent interview burn out by local retailers.

The interviews are what make the engagement “pop” for the students, both industry based or university enrolled. Using both statistical and other informational research along with the interviews, students learn to integrate current retail statistics with local retail activities. Suggested interview questions, stated objectives for the activity, and guidelines in the activity description help students to pinpoint how these statistics are impacted by environmental factors as well as the strategic plan and mission statement of the selected retailer.

Segment Two – Assessing the Financial Information

During the next or second segment of the course, we explain how the retail elements of wholesale cost, markup, and retail price relate both to a retailer’s strategic business plan (topics addressed in retail management and finance classes) and to a retailer’s expanded Profit and Loss Statement (topics studied in accounting). Retail math concepts of initial markup, cumulative markup, maintained markup, and gross margin are related in class to current buying practices as well as to principles from previous merchandising classes.

At this point in the course, students return to their customer/retailers for a second informational interview. In this interview or interviews as more than one visit may be needed, students are asking questions about margins and other financial practices. When the students hear a buyer, merchandiser or store manager use the terms that were discussed in class, the experience is often eye-opening for the students. They return to class and say “They calculated stock average just as we did in class,” “Their spreadsheets are based on Excel just like the ones we do,” or “I can’t believe that their margins are so similar to the ones we calculated in class.” Being able to discuss financial terms with someone who actually uses them every day helps the students to see that merchandisers, both at the apparel company and in retail firms, really do need to know this *math stuff*. Many apparel company employees, as well

as university students, who have never worked in the corporate offices of a retail firm have limited knowledge of what retail buyers really do.

Segment Three – Researching the Target Market

In this segment of the course, students conduct a market segment analysis of the target customer. To start this segment, the student teams ask their customer or retailer to describe the consumer(s) that the store is attempting to target. Many times students find that the descriptions of the market segments provided by the retailers are very general or defined by only a few statistics such as age, income, and occupation. Using the retailer information, the students must acquire through research detailed information about the generational groups and/or ethnic groups that are the major clients of the retailer. Students taking the course in apparel companies will work with their marketing research firm or the outsource firm providing this information. The students are instructed to identify characteristics, including demographics, psychographics, lifestyle attributes, and buying patterns (terminology introduced in consumer behavior and marketing classes) of these specific market segments (e.g., baby boomers, Gen Y, Gen X, tweens). The student teams must locate articles about their specified market segments in journals such as *-Advertising Age*, and they must conduct further computer searches to explore lifestyles and households by using such resources such as “The General Social Survey of U.S. Households”, “The Rite Site” or “VALS”. Additionally, they must research the most recent U.S. Census statistics compiled about the consumer in their state, county and/or city.

Going from the very general information given by the retailer to a very specific customer segment defined by extensive research, students realize that terms such as “middle class” is no longer valid to describe a specific consumer segment in a specific location for a particular retailer. With the

conclusion of the market research, students really understand the consumer market terms and how they relate to the retailer when they are required to think like customers or other retail buyers and write descriptions of their target consumers. We have found that many apparel company employees have unclear ideas about who are their customers and who are their final consumers, in specific, concrete terms. In class, students are reminded that average income and age, gender and education only *scratch the surface* of the depth of information needed in a well-researched marketing report. Also, during this segment of the project, the student teams are engaged in pinpointing product attributes, benefits, and styling characteristics desired by the store’s target consumer as well as the best marketing mix and techniques to reach their market segment(s). For university students these topics often are covered but not utilized in promotions and marketing classes, and for apparel company employees these are topics researched by some other department.

In this research segment of the project, students also conduct a trading-area analysis. In the analysis, the student teams are concentrating on the specific site selection, a store and fashion image analysis, and a competitive product analysis of the selected product classification (all concepts covered in marketing classes but rarely utilized in actual practice by students). The apparel company employees may find that their companies have conducted these studies but as employees they have never reviewed the information. When studies are not available, especially for the university students, we direct students to state departments of transportation, census sites, and other sources of government data. Examples of the specific data that are researched include the following: (a) the local economic base of the area, including employment statistics; (b) major occupations and average salaries in the locale; and (c) interest rates plus commercial building start ups and housing patterns. Students also

determine population density of the trading area, trading patterns of the specific site location, and the number and locations of competitors in relation to the particular site of the retailer. To gather more location-specific data, the students are required to conduct informational interviews with the Chamber of Commerce, mall marketing departments, and/or the property owners of the shopping complexes. The students need to identify specific information with regard to location that will justify the specific site location of the retailer in order to reach the consumer described in the market segment analysis. Again, this may have been done in a corporate office but not reviewed by apparel company employees in merchandising.

Students may talk with the actual consumers in the targeted market segment to get a better understanding of why those particular customers visited a certain retailer in a specific site. For many students, this exercise is a very enlightening experience. All of a sudden, students realize that all those theories and principles studied in their retail management, consumer behavior and marketing classes are utilized in the “real world” of business, and that they will have the competitive advantage if they know how to use the information in an actual retail setting. With the conclusion of this research oriented segment, we discuss the market analysis and trading-area analysis findings with each team. The students are then required to discuss their market research findings with their retailer or customer contacts. Questions such as “How does this compare to what you thought your consumer was doing?” are listed in the project guidelines. Prior to this third interview, students have written a draft of their research with references, so they have information to share and are directed not to gather market information by grilling their retailers.

Segment Four – Implementing the Research

The research and other exercises completed in the three previous segments are compiled

at the beginning of the fourth segment to assist the students to think like their customer, a retail manager, buyer or merchandiser. In other words, students are preparing for the completion of merchandising activities (e.g., planning sales, determining markdowns, and setting stock levels) as well as creating the final calculations for the Six-Month Plan. The fourth segment of the class consists of student teams examining in-detail the strategic plan of the selected retailer and utilizing that plan to build a Six-Month Merchandise Budget for the actual retail store. Although many apparel company employees in merchandising work closely with the retail buyer or merchandiser many of them have never developed or studied a Six-Month retail plan. To complete this fourth segment, students select a specific department or a specific product classification within their customer/retailer’s merchandise assortment. To research this department or product classification, our students are applying merchandising principles and mathematical formulas to create a workable Six-Month Merchandise Plan.

In class our students will have completed a number of Six-Month Plans as the textbook information is covered and the sample problems and exercises are completed. However, when they take the numbers they have collected and the market information that they have researched and struggle to determine what stock-sales ratios to use and what percentages to apply, they begin to think like their customers. Within their teams they report that they have major and lasting discussions on exactly what monthly ratios to use. For example, they draw upon what they learned about seasonal merchandise and shopping behaviors (topics covered in introductory merchandising courses and consumer behavior courses) to try to persuade their team mates about what percentages should be utilized to create a workable merchandise budget for their specific retailer and product classification. Using the numbers supplied in the exercises

makes the preparation of the Six-Month Plan a rote exercise but when students must justify their numbers and make them appropriate to the target consumer and their retailer customer, the students see how retail buyers and merchandisers have to combine many facts, figures and elusive information to make decisions. When engaged with the information in a real world application, the need for knowing mathematical formulas and being exact in their calculations become meaningful to students.

Description of Effectiveness of the Teaching Strategy

Although we hear some complaints about finding contacts and scheduling time for their interviews and market research, many students have told us that they enjoyed conducting the research and using content from previous classes. Final exams and other post-project tests show that our students are clearly more able to understand the use of the retail math formulas than with classroom instruction alone. In addition, university students report in assessment instruments with this class they now feel confident in working with retail math formulas in combination with merchandising principles. In fact, many students, and alumni, say they review the class content before taking retail math quizzes required at job interviews for companies such as GAP, Peebles, and Saks. Students, who have reviewed their class notes before interviews or on the job tests, have informed us of their high marks on the retailer tests. Alumni report that they were the envy of peers when required to take retail math or critical thinking tests for job placement or career promotion opportunities because other interviewees or employees had not had this type of integrated course. Having participated in one of our industry courses, apparel company employees report that they are better able to understand the stresses and demands of their customers, and are therefore better able to meet their needs and develop profitable supply chain relations with their customers.

Additionally, the contact retailers, those participating with the university student teams, inform us about how impressed they are with the student teams and their engagement with the information. They are particularly impressed with their assimilation and verbalization of a vast variety of concepts. All of which they report are pertinent to the job of merchandiser. Many of these contact retailers become future employers of the university students. Our students are always impressed that they are offered jobs by their retailers. Students become truly engaged in the information; because they have the opportunity to use what they have learned in classes that often seems unrelated and unusable to them. In addition, we accomplish our goal of an innovative teaching project by generating an environment that is supportive of student learning while meeting the missions of our universities. Recently, a student informed one of us that based upon this revised class, she had decided not to change her major and will stay in merchandising!

Each semester we share with each other our student anecdotal reports and comments from university survey forms and combine results to refine the class for the next semester. In addition, we ask for feedback from apparel companies who ask for our courses, the contact retailers, and our alumni who have been in the field for more than a year. All stakeholders report that the course is effective and meets the goal of helping the students, industry and university based, to think like the customer. Not only do we seek feedback about the course for assessment but the contact with retailers and alumni is essential to keeping the course content current. To include the most current retail practices into the classroom, we incorporate input from alumni and employers in the retail workforce as well as our apparel company contacts. Integrating course content with practical applications through the class activities of research and retail contacts will continue to be a major component of our class.

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