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# Putting designers on the retail rack

Agent helps creatives get their fashion into the country's big retailers

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● Items from local fashion designers are still hard to find in mainstream retail stores as the high costs they face count against them compared to mass-produced fashion, but more and more designers are getting business savvy and finding other opportunities to sell their designs.

The limited production of fabric in South Africa plays a significant role in restricting the number of units that can be produced for fashion retailers.

Most local designers who supply retailers do so in small numbers and their designs are at a few selected stores nationwide.

But consultants are emerging to help designers get greater traction in retail stores.

Among them is Annette Pringle-Kölsch, managing member and co-founder of The Fashion Agent.

"Our purpose is to connect designers with the wholesale buyer of department stores," she said.

"We supply fashion brands through our wholesale channels to retailers, online platforms, professional independent boutiques and concept stores on the African continent and abroad, with a focus on South Africa."

The Fashion Agent has 15 South African designer brands that are stocked in retailers, with five of them sold online.

For young designer Rich Mnisi, graduating from fashion school and becoming a designer has been a dream come true. But working with The Fashion Agent he is learning to build a successful brand.

Mnisi said the business model works for his business because it helps bridge the gap between the buyer and the designer. "They help in terms of strategies of the business of fashion, and make sure that you cater for your market, especially for the client."

He said the benefits of working with an agent included assistance with quality control, liaising with manufacturers and facilitating packaging and distribution.

Mnisi supplies clothing to Woolworths under its local designer title "Style By SA", and to online shopping sites. He said in one season he introduces three styles, which would include 80 to 100 units that can be produced five times.

But navigating the demands of big retailers is not the only challenge for designers.

Pringle-Kölsch said the limited number of units produced by local designers was due to the small textile industry in South Africa and that most fabric is imported.

South Africa needs to develop its fabric agency network and promote local designers to help grow the textile industry, she said.

Pringle-Kölsch said many fabric mills had closed over the past 14 years.

But there are opportunities.

One initiative by Cotton South Africa is the Sustainable Cotton Cluster, which aims to create an enabling environment for cotton producers and manufacturers to supply local and international customers with fully traceable and sustainable cotton products.

Retailers and professional buyers are looking for garments made out of new materials – for example,

fabrics made out of recycled plastic bottles or from cotton sourced from producers signed up to the Better Cotton Initiative.

The initiative's cotton promotes high standards and practices in cotton farming in 24 countries.

"In other words, sustainability not only means natural fibres but also using new technology to transform 'waste' into new, desirable products, giving it a second chance to live," said Pringle-Kölsch.

As one of South Africa's leading retailers, TFG, which owns the Foschini and @Home retail brands, has collaborated with local designers. TFG launched its first home-wear collaboration with local designer Gavin Rajah last year. The limited-edition collection consists of handcrafted linen and scented candles.

The head of @Home, Chris Swart, said these collaborations were based on commercial value and customer interest. Collaboration between a designer and a retailer allows both to respond to what the market wants.

However, Swart said, one challenge is that many local designers don't have manufacturing capabilities.

"TFG has two factories in the country that train and employ locals to make quality products for its stores – so it's always first choice to design and manufacture locally.

"Where designers don't have manufacturing capability and it makes business sense, TFG would connect these designers to local suppliers and manufacturers."

He said in certain cases, and only where necessary, the design process would take place locally and products would be manufactured offshore.

But sometimes designers can be their own worst enemy.

"Often South African designers are only after pro-

ducing one-off, bespoke, high-ticket items, which don't necessarily work for their brands. Finding that delicate balance between quality and price is often what compromises collaborations," said Swart.

Chris Viljoen, the creative director of online retailer Spree, said the designers it works with need to have a clear point of view and a clear signature that is different.

The product "also needs to be commercial enough for us to be able to sell, and have a clear social media following".

"The Fashion Agent on our side plays a role in making sure that we are happy with the pricing of the designers and pushes through deliveries and the quality before it gets delivered to us," said Viljoen.

"The Fashion Agent is the glue that works between the two of us. It helps having the support of someone who will make sure that production is pushed and delivered on time.

"Designers can be creative, but it's having a collection in different sizes and having them graded."

Spree orders between 15 and 20 units from designers, and would consider ordering more depending on the sales track record of that designer.



**The Fashion Agent makes sure that you cater for your market, especially for the client**

**Rich Mnisi**  
Fashion designer