

Feature Article

Bringing the right fit to the masses

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Body shape is a big issue, and brands that understand this are seeing significant improvements in sales, profits and customer loyalty. Intellifit and Fit Spec are two American companies spearheading the proliferation of great fitting clothes – including the development of non-linear grade rules based on body shape and a regional size study with key retailers in Europe. By Natalie R Weathers.

Fit is everything in the fashion industry because it is one of the crucial determinants for brand loyalty and future sales growth.

Intellifit's first foray into the apparel industry was in 2001 when it was hired to carry out manual measurement acquisitions to help a small group of fashion retailers improve their grade rules. The goal was that Intellifit's measurement analysis would be used to produce better fitting garments for these retailers' consumers.

According to Ed Gribbin, who until recently presided over Intellifit, although Size USA had done a study on size and fit in the USA between 2002 and 2004, Size USA's sample size was too small. Size USA sampled approximately 10,000 individuals over a period of two years. The geographic region from where Size USA did its sampling was narrow: the chosen sites were college campuses and a JCPenney retail location in Texas.

Clearly, this was not a representative sample of US consumers; the Size USA study was not geographically, ethnically or age diverse. But while the Size USA study did not solve fit issues in the United States, it was an important study because it pointed out that fit is a problem.

The Size USA study also did not break down the fit problem to differentiate the fit challenges that (for example) Bebe has, versus Federated's fit challenges, versus Liz Claiborne's fit challenges.

Intellifit's brainpower

Intellifit uses a scanning booth as the vehicle to quickly take consumer's body measurements.

In 2002, Ed Gribbin realised that the millimetre wave technology (MWT) developed by Pacific Northwest National Laboratories for stealth weapons testing in the 1980s was based on algorithms that could be applied to body scanning technology.

Gribbin happened to notice on the Pacific Lab's website, in very fine print, that the technology could be used for apparel.

After acquiring the license for MWT from Pacific Labs – and many scanning booth prototypes later – Intellifit was finally able to test its scanning booth at a Mary Kay cosmetics sales convention in January 2004.

It scanned 1100 women over two days and found that it was a smashing hit: it worked reliably and there were only a few measurements that needed to be fine-tuned.

In some ways Intellifit owes the birth of its innovative scanning booth to flaws it discovered in fit scanning technology that had already been developed by [TC]2 in the 1990s using white light technology.

When Intellifit acquired a contract to outfit employees of a gaming company in Las Vegas in 2002, it leased a body scanner from [TC]2.

One would think that employees of the gaming trade – especially cocktail waitresses – would be quite accustomed to wearing a small amount of clothing in public. However, Intellifit found that the [TC]2 scanning machine was challenging because it was time intensive and consumers had to remove their clothes and put on form-fitting clothing, such as a leotard, for body measuring points to be accurately scanned.

In contrast, the scanning booth that Intellifit has developed is easy for the customer to use and for the retail client to maintain. There is no need for the customer to disrobe, and scanning takes approximately 30 seconds.

Intellifit also tries to take into consideration the client's requirement – versus a concern with the average customer.

When retailers try to please the average customer in terms of sizing, they end up pleasing very few. So Intellifit's ability to customise the focus on their particular targeted consumer is unique, and explains why it has been such a hit with retailers who have in particular, very niche customers: David's Bridal and Lane Bryant are good examples.

Intellifit's core products are its customised markers, the leasing of the Intellifit scanning booths, and "the measurement solution." The "measurement solution" is the fact that after working with Intellifit, the retailer ends up with a database of its customers' measurement points, new specs and grade rules.

Despite the ease of use that Intellifit's scanning booth offers to the consumer, there are still challenges. For example, there is a public perception that body scanning is unsafe, and some consumers still associate it with some sort of futuristic sci-fi body zapping experience. Intellifit is truly painless.

Another emerging challenge is that while retailers understand the benefits the scanning booths offer for data gathering and improving customer satisfaction with fit, they find the size of the actual booth too large and bulky for their store's interiors.

One way that Intellifit has adapted to this, is by placing the scanning booths in central locations at shopping malls. A list of retailers who are wired into the Intellifit system at that particular mall is listed on the side of the booth. An Intellifit operator is on hand to assist customers get their body measurements scanned.

The placement of a centralised Intellifit booth in a mall, versus spread out among many stores, has solved the challenge of the scanning booth's bulky size. It also serves as an indirect reminder to consumers of how the efforts to provide better fitting clothing are part of the agenda of a larger group of retailers. In this way, customising correct fit becomes normalised.

The David's Bridal example

Bob Huth, CEO of David's Bridal, is a champion of the Intellifit technology. David's Bridal is in a unique situation because it services customers – brides to be – who are buying a mass produced garment for an occasion where the garment is traditionally customised. What bride wants her dress to be recognised as an off-the-rack gown by the guests in the pews?

David's Bridal wanted to improve its conversion rates (ie conversions to sales). Huth suspected that size and fit issues were decreasing those conversion rates because "products were not matching the bodies coming in."

That's where Intellifit came in: Intellifit collected 5,000 measurement profiles from 38 David's Bridal stores around the USA. Thirty-four measurement spec points were taken of each individual. This was done manually and it took eight weeks to complete.

Intellifit converted the data and then developed new fit specs and grade rules for David's Bridal. Intellifit's system can also capture data in case the customer decides to purchase online – this results in a decrease in

the exchange rate and return rates.

In 2002, David's Bridal tracked 10% of its bridal line and found that sell-throughs were 70% higher on those dresses than on any other dresses in the stores.

An empowering tool for technical design teams

Training is available for those retailers who set up a scanning booth at a retail site. A manual for user interface is provided as well as on-site training and three-hour walk-throughs with employees reviewing all possible scenarios.

Intellifit also works with companies' technical design teams and asks what they want the technology to do for them. The system is then programmed to take those specific measurements. Gribbin says that technical design teams embrace the technology because it adds value to the work they do.

Fit spec: information is power

The light bulb went off in Ed Gribbin's head to start Fit Spec when, in October 2005, he reviewed the thousands of sizing data points he had collected over the past five years for Intellifit's "consulting" business.

"I realised I was the main person at Intellifit who understood apparel and technical design and that the consulting business had increased five-fold in size in five years; there was an opportunity to still stay involved with Intellifit and do consulting full time."

Gribbin is a veteran of the apparel industry, having worked in technical, merchandising and management roles for 25 years. Gribbin co-founded active outerwear leader, Boathouse Sports in 1981. He began his career in production with Bendinger Brothers, helped develop career apparel pioneer Design Accessories, and spent ten years at Angelica Uniform Group in a variety of sales, marketing, merchandising and management positions, departing as senior vice president prior to joining Intellifit.

Now Gribbin works with current Intellifit clients as well as non-Intellifit clients.

One example of Gribbin's many clients is Lands' End. He is doing an analysis of Lands' End's pants and blouses sizing. The Lands' End Missy customer and the Plus customer are two different age groups and, consequently, have different fit characteristics beyond size.

The question that Lands' End put to Gribbin was: "What's right and what's wrong with how we do fit for each of these two groups?" Land's End will use Gribbin's analysis to develop new blocks and will test the garments made from these new blocks.

Non-linear grade rules

Gribbin points out that body shape is a big issue. "Linear grade rules do not work because bodies are not graded linearly," he explains. "Most retailers grade up and grade down based on a size 8. The assumption made is that the bust, hip and waist all grade identically – but mass is distributed unevenly."

Gribbin is developing non-linear grade rules based on body shape – this is somewhat radical in the apparel industry! More accommodation is needed for thicker waists in larger sizes; most women are not hour-glass shaped. Gribbin's non-linear grade rules will thus accommodate more people better than current fits.

As an extension of Gribbin's non-linear grade rules he points out that most clothing brands work off of a 10" hip differential (ie, the differential between the hip and the waist). However, only 5-8% of American women have a 10" hip differential – also known as the lovely hour-glass figure.

By analysing the thousands of data points he has collected over the past five years, Gribbin has found that the average hip differential in America is 7" – not 10". With this information, he is helping one client to diversify its assortment by keeping the 10" hip differential, but also adding in a second and third hip differential to truly cover the market.

Gribbin's next project is to assist some key retailers in Europe with a regional size study. He will install Intellifit

scanning machines at regional locations throughout Europe over a period of months. This will help the participating retailers to pinpoint the regional size differences of the diverse group of consumers whom they serve.

Leading apparel industry analyst, Marshall Cohen, of NPD Group, recently noted that: "2006 is going to be the Year of Fit."

Gribbin could not agree more. "Brands are increasingly aware of how body shape and body type have as much bearing on what fits as typical waist and hip measurements.

"You can't solve a three-dimensional problem with a two-dimensional solution. The brands that understand and act on that, using the right data, will see significant results not only in sales, but in bottom line profits and customer loyalty."

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