

Fashion Merchandising

WALKING BETWEEN THE RACKS OF dresses, a stylish-looking woman glances at each one, her eyes darting quickly over the garments. She stops to examine the fabric of a colorful, patterned dress. "Why do you think this one isn't selling?" she asks the sales associate. Because the woman is the buyer for the department, the answer is important to her. Like other professionals in the fashion merchandising field, she pays close attention to what the store's customers buy. She knows that retailing is a very competitive field.

Fashion merchandising is part of the huge retail industry that sells goods to consumers. Fashions are sold in stores, as well as through catalogs and the Internet.

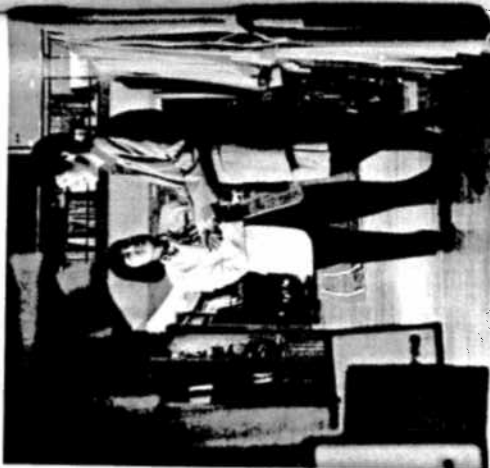
Careers in fashion merchandising are varied. People must plan what to sell, buy the merchandise, and then do the selling. Those in management positions oversee others and make high-level decisions. In a small store, one person might have varied responsibilities. In a large store or a chain, careers tend to be specialized. Because many stores are open at night and on weekends, hours can be flexible. Technology is part of most positions. People use scanners to track inventory, software to plan shelf space, and information systems to run Web sites. Fashion merchandising offers career possibilities for people with wide-ranging interests and talents.

Outstanding sales associates, who help customers choose and buy merchandise, are valued in business. What do you think it takes for a sales associate to be helpful but not pushy?

IS THIS FIELD FOR YOU?

Merchandising jobs are people-oriented. They are also high-pressure and often stress-filled. People who excel in the field generally identify with the statements below.

- I'm very interested in fashion.
- I tend to lead rather than follow.
- I can "roll with the punches."
- I enjoy learning different skills.
- I'm interested in working with others.
- I see new technology as an asset.



Education and Training

A job as a sales associate or stock clerk is a good start to a career in retailing. Hours can be flexible and part-time, which works well for those still in school. As entry-level positions, these jobs reveal how a store operates "from the ground up."

Education after high school makes promotion more likely. A two- or four-year degree from a college or business school is advisable, with course work in communication, finance, marketing, merchandising, and information systems. For a career in management, a university degree—perhaps in retailing—plus business administration courses is a good plan.

Getting a degree may make a person eligible for an executive training program, offered by many large retailers. A person gains experience in all areas of a retailer's operation, qualifying for a little higher position on the career ladder. Starting as a retail management trainee rather than a sales associate or as an assistant buyer instead of a stock clerk is possible.

Possible Career Paths

Although few people rise from stock clerk to company president, advancement is encouraged. Most companies find that promoting from within is more effective, less expensive, and increases employees' incentive to succeed.

THE SKILLS YOU NEED

People in fashion merchandising do well when they have the skills below.

- Interpersonal communication
- Organization
- Management
- Decision making and problem solving
- Mathematical ability
- Analytical thinking
- Mental and physical stamina

Merchandising careers tend to follow either a fashion or business path. An assistant buyer learns the job from a head buyer and can advance to that position when the head buyer is promoted to merchandise manager. Likewise, after designing window and in-store displays for a few years, a display artist may join the fashion office staff and eventually become fashion director for the entire store. Of course, crossing career lines is not uncommon. A display artist may grow interested in sales promotion, someday becoming a vice president in that division.



Imagine being the buyer for a large department store. The jewelry you like best might not be right for the store. How would you choose jewelry and other items that customers will like?

Choosing a Fashion Merchandising Career

BUYER | **CUSTOMER SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE** | **DEPARTMENT MANAGER**
FASHION COORDINATOR | **MERCHANDISE MANAGER** | **PRODUCT DEVELOPER** | **SALES ASSOCIATE** | **STOCK CLERK** | **STORE MANAGER**

Stock Clerk

Stock clerks manage the merchandise in stock rooms and on sales floors. In this entry-level position, they support the sales staff by restocking the shelves, tables, and racks with merchandise. Stock clerks may gather clothes from fitting rooms and return them to the sales area. They may attach security tags to expensive items.

In larger stores, as well as mail-order and Internet businesses, stock clerks may be inventory clerks or merchandise distributors. Behind the scenes, they help the shipping clerk unpack and inspect merchandise when it arrives. They set aside damaged goods for the store's buyer to examine. Although conveyor belts and automatically guided vehicles are increasingly used, this work can be physically demanding.

Sales Associate

Sales associates and sales specialists ring up sales, rehang clothes, and assist customers. A good sales associate is familiar enough with the store's merchandise to help customers find what they want and make choices.

Shoppers can be pleasant or unpleasant, but a good sales associate remains polite and helpful. Those who work on commission, earning a percentage of the clothing's price, benefit by a positive attitude. Since the retail business is very competitive, a likable competent sales staff is needed to help a store build loyal customers.

Buyer

A store's success depends heavily on the buyer's fashion foresight. This is the person who selects and purchases what the retailer sells. While trying to predict what will be popular next season, to make predictions, buyers do research, review industry publications and Web sites and keep a lookout for trends in the making. Another prediction tool is sales analysis. Careful interpretations can indicate where changes are happening.

Buyers travel regularly to market weeks in New York City, Paris, and other major cities to visit the showrooms of designers and manufacturers. There they can see what's new and place orders for future deliveries.

Fashion coordinators stay up-to-date on fashion. These professionals work with different departments so that decisions about buying, advertising, display, and promotion are "coordinating."

Fashion Coordinator

Each retailer has a fashion personality, an image to present to the public. Compare the personalities of a trendy boutique and family-oriented department store, for example. Upholding this image is the task of the fashion office, and especially its head, an upper-level executive called the fashion coordinator.

The fashion coordinator travels to designers' showings and textile mills, reads trade publications, and taps other sources to learn about the latest fashion trends. This information is shared with the buyers, department managers, merchandise managers, and advertising and display departments. The result is a common theme or image that unites every department of the store. Orchestrating fashion shows is another responsibility of coordinators. A fashion coordinator's work is demanding but very appealing to many.

Merchandise Manager

Merchandise managers focus on the sales performance of one or more departments. In this role, they oversee and approve the decisions of buyers who report to them.

Merchandise managers must understand market trends, sales projections, and the retailer's fashion image. Competition demands that these managers be creative in coming up with new merchandise and promotions that will increase sales. They often travel with buyers to markets and always authorize their budget. This career has a high level of responsibility, but the financial rewards can be good for someone who is well organized and energetic.



In working with a buyer, the merchandise manager quizzed decisions about what items the store will sell.

CAREER APPLICATIONS

1. Pros and cons. Before choosing a career, think about the pros and cons. What would the positive and negative sides of a career in sales be? List points under each. Then explain why that would or would not be a suitable career field for you.
2. F.C.C.L.A. Plan a Chapter Service Project on balancing work and family life. Through interviews and library research, study merchandising company policies on personal days and child care. Talk to families about how they handle time demands. Compile your findings on the problems, solutions, and resources.
3. Professionalism. Choose one of the careers described here. Then give examples of how people in that career might demonstrate the following qualities: honesty, reliability, fairness, cooperation, self-discipline, and loyalty.