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Victoria's Secret: Framing the Fit Problem
Jordan K. Speer

The implementation story of Shapely Shadow's FastFit360 at Victoria's Secret is not your typical long, drawn out and often painful process.

When Virginia Meckley, manager of technical design, launch bras at Victoria's Secret was working with Shapely Shadow to develop dress forms, Roxy Starr, Shapely Shadow's vice president of IT services, demonstrated the company's FastFit360 solution.

Meckley immediately recognized that the tool would solve many of the company's fit problems - everything from the need for participating in live fit sessions to the difficulties of communicating with vendor partners. Senior vice president Donald Stewart reviewed the solution and agreed.

Shortly thereafter, in February 2008, Victoria's Secret implemented the solution at all of its locations.

Less than one year later, Meckley says she cannot remember life before FastFit. "How did we survive?" she wonders.

The challenge of getting fit right, from afar
One of the biggest challenges in the apparel business, says Meckley, comes from the lack of visual tools. With most production well offshore and fit sessions taking place in multiple locations around the world, it can be very difficult not only to create the conditions that produce a consistent fit from location to location, but also to convey the problems and inconsistencies of a prototype back to the vendor producing the garment, she says.

Even more difficult is doing this in a timely fashion, so that garments hit the shelves on deadline. "If you ship something from Asia, when it arrives, we're saying: 'wow, we've lost so much time out of the calendar, and we want to make this change to make it better for the customer, but we don't have any time left.' "So we either air ship it, or move the floor set date," says Meckley. But that creates stress, and in both cases affects the bottom line: either you're biting into the profit, or you don't have the product when you wanted it.

Making life simple: a picture is worth 1,000 words
These days, use of FastFit360 has made the speed of sample shipping pretty much a moot point at Victoria's Secret. The tool allows the company to view fit sessions, in great detail and offline, at their convenience, and to easily identify and convey problems or changes back to the vendor.

FastFit360 functions like an old film, or a kid's illustrated flip book, where fanning your thumb over the pages brings a story to life as each still photo seems to gain motion when viewed in rapid succession with those that come after it.

In just the same fashion, FastFit cuts up to 99 frames out of 15 seconds of digital video to create a 1MB file that captures movement. The video is taken as a fit model poses on a "lazy-susan" type of turntable, capturing a full 360-degree view of the garment for online fit approvals. The video is not animated or built on 3D modeling; in other words, each of the up to 99 frames shot can be viewed separately as a jpeg.

In practical terms what this means is that all parties involved in the fit process at Victoria's Secret - which includes technical designers in Honk Kong, Sri Lanka, Ohio and New York - are able to view the same film of a fit session and identify or receive instruction about the precise spot or spots, by viewing up to 99 still digital frames, where there may be a problem.

"What Fastfit does is give you a consistent visual tool that takes subjectivity out of the equation," says Meckley.

From there, comments and on-body measurements - of which there are many in the intimates business - are embedded directly into the file. Victoria's Secret uses the first of two available screens to embed the measurements, and the second to record visual observations, as well as feedback from the fit model.

Additionally, to ensure that fit sessions from location to location are as consistent as possible, the set up is

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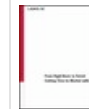Thursday, December 4, 2008 | 2:00 p.m. ET
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the same everywhere (the camera is the same distance from the turntable in all locations; the zoom is on the same setting on the camera for all locations), with all equipment calibrated across regions.

Finally, getting some sleep

Before FastFit, the fit session m.o. entailed participating in a live session via videoconference. Each location had a fit model, and all three or four would be on-screen at the same time, each occupying a corner of the screen.

"As you can imagine, the connections weren't great," says Meckley. As each model took her turn in front of the camera, viewers in all locations squinted at the small picture, trying to get a good look at the fit, she says. The on-screen video was small and difficult to see, the lighting was poor and there was no way to hone in well on a particular spot.

Perhaps worst of all, because the sessions were live, they often required participation at odd, non-business hours.

"We here in technical design remember being here quite frequently at all hours of the night," says Meckley. "We don't do that anymore.

"Now, we just zip up the FastFit file and send them out." All parties meet via conference call at more reasonable hours, from home, share thoughts "and then 'boom,' off we go with our lives. It's fantastic."

The solution has freed Meckley and her team - as well as all other parties needing insight into garment fit - from the chains of a fit session calendar, and given them quick and accurate access to the information.

and "We've trained everyone so they're comfortable looking at that file and making decisions: executive team, design team, vendors, everyone." Recently, when Meckley's team undertook to improve an existing product, one executive requested to see the "before""after" product, to confirm that it was actually being improved.

In just 10 minutes, she forwarded the FastFit files and briefly summarized the documented changes. "Previously, it would take a lot of time to pull that together and validate that we've made the improvements. ...Now you could see, visually, from one file to the other, where the garment was improved. We could point out which frames to look at, and which attributes we'd improved or were working on improving."

Files are easily accessible from the library of fit sessions that Victoria's Secret is building. Now, first thing, FastFit images are labeled and stored for easy access, which is helpful for scenarios like the aforementioned, as well as for building new styles. Rather than start from scratch, the team can call up the fit (and all associated comments and measurements) of, say, a best seller, and use that as a launching point for a new design and ultimately speeding up the entire development process.

Previously, the only "hard copy" of a fit session consisted of four photos taken from the back, front and sides.

Speeding the process, eliminating miscommunications

Victoria's Secret is reaping other benefits from the solution, says Meckley, who says it has multiple uses.

For example, the company is using it to identify slight differences in the way garments fit individual fit models, and reincorporating that information into its design and development processes.

"No two models are exactly the same," says Meckley. Being able to identify those slight differences from model to model offers yet another gauge to be able to make the product available to an even wider audience.

And after the prototype is perfect? The FastFit file is also trotted out during production in the case of quality problems. First production is filmed on a fit model, and then compared frame by frame to the prototype file.

Meckley also views the product as an excellent educational tool for use within the organization, and has plans to incorporate it as an aid in developing and presenting sessions for her colleagues.

Overall, the company is "thrilled" with the tool, and while she says she doesn't have specific results to share relative to eliminating sample production and time from the cycle, Meckley says that more corrections are being made the first time around, because they can be seen so much better in the FastFit files.

Because of this, and because everyone can provide input on a particular file within a 24 hour period, the speed of the whole process must be shrinking, she suspects.

"If I send something out tonight, by the time I get back tomorrow, everyone will have already weighed in, and by the time I leave tomorrow, we'll have our next steps mapped out," she says.

The new method has eliminated stress, knocked down language barriers and made its relationship with its vendors one that is more of a collaborative partnership.

"They no longer have to wonder if they're doing the right thing. We both are looking at the same thing and commenting on it." Using the FastFit file also eliminates errors and miscommunications: because the comments are embedded in the file, it is impossible to print a copy of the file and mix the wrong comments to the wrong photo.

In short, says Meckley: "Fastfit has made our lives so much better."

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fast facts

Founded: 1977
Parent: Limited Brands
Headquarters: Columbus, OH
Apparel products: Bras, panties, sleepwear, hosiery, women's clothing
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