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Volume II



# Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Economics and Management (CIREG 2016) Volume II

Edited by

Lahoucine Berbou,  
Aziz Fassouane,  
Bouchaib Mokhtari,  
Mustapha Belaiassaoui  
and Fatima Ezzahra Siragi

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# MARKETING

# FAST FASHION: A FLOW CONTROL POLICY IN THE APPAREL SUPPLY CHAIN

ABDERRAHMANE MOUSSAID,<sup>1</sup>  
ABDELMOUNAIM AGGOUR<sup>2</sup>  
AND AHMED ABOU EL HASSAN<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Fast fashion is considered a key success factor for fashion brand leaders. This concept, which is associated with other theories: Just in Time (JIT) and Quick Response (QR), can hardly be dissociated from the world fashion industry, which is regarded as a key success strategy for contemporary fashion retailers.<sup>4</sup> Fast-fashion has received a little attention in academic research and was explored within the context of supply chain management for the first time in 1995.<sup>5</sup>

Fast fashion retailing is often referred to as fashion “McDonaldization.”<sup>6</sup> This means that fast fashion retailers have efficient and agile supplies allowing them to produce fashion items within three to four weeks, unlike traditional retailers that have a typical lead time of nine months. In addition, fast-fashion items have affordable prices and are of medium quality, a different concept from the traditional system focusing on the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> *FSJES Casablanca - Université Hassan II*

<sup>2</sup> *FSJES Casablanca - Université Hassan II*

<sup>3</sup> *FSJES Casablanca - Université Hassan II*

<sup>4</sup> Barnes and Lea-greenwood, 264.

<sup>5</sup> Susan S. Fiorito, Eleanor G. May and Katherine Straughn, “Quick response in retailing: components and implementation,” *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 23, no. 5(1995): 12.

<sup>6</sup> George Ritzer, “The “McDonaldization” of society,” *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 6, no. 1 (1983): 100.

items that can be carried for a long period.<sup>7</sup> Many definitions of the fast fashion concept have been found in the literature:

- “Various strategies to respond commercially to the latest fashion trends.”<sup>8</sup>
- “A marketing strategy responding to current fashion trends quickly by providing frequently updated fashion products.”<sup>9</sup>
- “The ability to track fashion trends quickly and to identify potentially popular new designs through daily proximity to fashion markets, fashion images and fashion markers.”<sup>10</sup>

To gain a better understanding of fast fashion, it is important to understand how the system is different from both the traditional system and quick response. Thus, Cachon and Swinney classified production systems into four possible systems <sup>11</sup>(Table 1.1):

- **Traditional system:** represents a conventional retailer with long lead times and a standard item design. This system is often called a push supply chain <sup>12</sup> where production is based on past sales. Therefore, the average cycle time from design to production varies between six to twelve months and operations are inventory based.
- **Fast Fashion:** a system that combines the capabilities of the two other systems:
- **Quick Response:** this is a pull supply chain system, based on information and is customer driven.
- **Enhanced Design:** focuses on the design ability to motivate consumers’ willingness-to-pay but ignores reduction of the production lead.

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<sup>7</sup> Pankaj Ghemawat and Jose Luis Nueno, “ZARA: Fast fashion,” Vol. 1. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 2003), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Jin et al., 196

<sup>9</sup> Sang-Eun Byun and Brenda Sternquist, “The antecedents of in-store hoarding: measurement and application in the fast fashion retail environment,” *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (2008): 135.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Doeringer and Sarah Crean, “Can fast fashion save the US apparel industry?” *Socio-Economic Review*, Vol. 4, no.3 (2006): 17.

<sup>11</sup> Gérard P. Cachon and Robert Swinney, “The value of fast fashion: Quick response, enhanced design, and strategic consumer behavior,” *Management science*, Vol. 57, no.4 (2011): 781.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Levy and Barton Weitz, *Retailing management*. (New York: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 1998), 261.

The main objective of fast fashion is to “reduce the processes involved in the buying cycle and lead times for getting new fashion product into stores, in order to satisfy consumer demand at its peak.”<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1: The four possible production systems<sup>14</sup>**

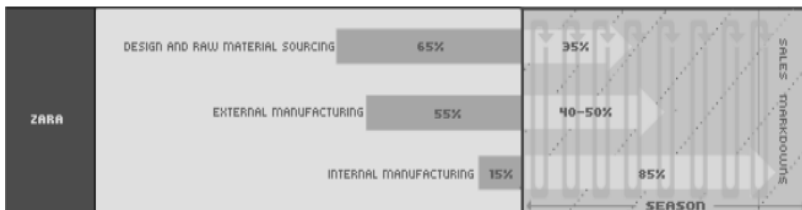
	Normal Design	Enhanced Design
Slow Production	Traditional	Enhanced Design
Quick Response	Quick Response	Fast Fashion

Thus, lead time reduction occurs by completion of 65% of product design and purchases of raw material before the season starts, external manufacturing is completed for 55% while internal production is completed only for 15%. During the season, 45% of the remaining external production is completed and the 85% of internal production<sup>15</sup> (Figure 1.1).

Instead, traditional retailers finish product design and production before the season starts and deliver to stores during the season. When demand is uncertain, the best time to predict the demand is when an actual sale

Occurs. The closer the forecast to the actual selling time is, the better the demand forecast will be. Traditional retailers predict demand nine months before the season which makes the forecast less reliable.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 1: 'Product Pre-commitment', Exhibit13<sup>17</sup>



<sup>13</sup> Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 259.

<sup>14</sup> Cachon and Swinney, 781.

<sup>15</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 261.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 14, 30.

## **2. Contributory factors to fast fashion emergence**

In the literature, three elements are the main goals for which a fashion retailer adopts the Fast Fashion Model.

### **2.1 Demand uncertainty**

What is so different about fashion items is their unpredictable demand. Factors that contribute to the demand uncertainty include: high rate of new product introduction and their short life cycle leading to increased SKUs (Stock Keeping Unit) available to consumers in a season. “This wide range of choices increases consumer satisfaction levels; however, retailers then have the burden of carrying at least a couple of items per SKU, resulting in a greater chance of not selling the entire inventory than before.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition, apparel purchase decisions are mostly made by individual consumers’ taste and social psychological reasons, rather than economic reasons.<sup>19</sup>

### **2.2 Supply chain agility**

The right supply chain management should take into account its demand characteristics.<sup>20</sup> Hence, products can be classified depending on their demand type: functional products with predictable demand, low product variety (ten to twenty per category) and a long lifecycle (more than two years), and innovative products with unpredictable demand, high product variety (up to millions of variants per category) with a short life cycle (three to twelve months).

Functional goods require an efficient process that focuses on cost minimisation because of their stable and predictable demand, while the innovative goods demand a responsive process to the market needs that focus on product availability and replenishment flexibility.<sup>21</sup> Agility is better

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<sup>18</sup> Jin et al., 198.

<sup>19</sup> Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 260.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall L. Fisher, “What is the right supply chain for your product?” (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 1997), 106.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 109.

suited for less predictable environments where demand is volatile and the requirement for variety is high.<sup>22</sup>

There is a misunderstanding between an agile and a lean approach. The latter concept is originated from the Toyota Production System and it means “to do more with less waste.” It focuses on the reduction and elimination of waste. It can be applied in a predictable environment, high volume and low variety.<sup>23</sup> Agility is “the ability of an organization to respond rapidly to changes in demand both in terms of volume and variety.”<sup>24</sup>

Bruce, Daly and Towers also suggested lean supply for functional goods and agile supply for innovative goods<sup>25</sup>. “Since fashion apparel products represent innovative products, agile response is the appropriate approach for managing apparel supply chain”<sup>26</sup>. Jin et al., explained:

“Having a high stockout rate is a critical point for apparel products. Solving items stockouts by increasing inventory levels could lead to unsold items, since fashion items are in demand only for a short period of time due to fashion and seasonal changes. The unsold inventory will be sold during the sale season resulting in reduced profit. Having more inventory than usual conducts to high probability for unsold items and hence sale the item, or less inventory which leads to a stockout. For these reasons, more and more retailers make frequent and continuous orders based on demand real time tracking using IT (Barcode, EDI) and ask for deliveries within less than three days. Manufacturers cannot fill these orders if they either hold more finished goods in inventory or shorten production time.”<sup>27</sup>

In effect, the production cycle time reduction is more efficient than holding more inventory. Therefore, manufacturers compete not only on the basis of price, but also on their ability to quickly respond to the retailers’ needs. According to Martin Christopher, there are several ways to achieve agility:

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<sup>22</sup> MartinChristopher, “The Agile Supply Chain: Competing in Volatile Markets,” *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2000): 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Bruce, Lucy Daly and Neil Towers, “Lean or agile: a solution for supply chain management in the textiles and clothing industry?” *International journal of operations & production management*, Vol. 24, no. 2 (2004): 154.

<sup>26</sup> Jin et al., 199.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



- Postponement: consists of delaying the final assembly of a product until the retailer's order arrives. The manufacturer keeps standard semi-finished goods until more precise information on market demand is available in order to be more responsive. Postponement allows further flexibility to market demand because the same component can be personalised to a variety of finished goods.<sup>28</sup>
- Suppliers partnership: a higher level of connectivity between the manufacturer and the retailer is required, by sharing information about demand and production and collaborating together.<sup>29</sup>
- Using Information Technology: to build a better partnership between retailers and manufacturers, information technology is required.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3 Enhanced design

Enhanced design is another critical success element of fast fashion; it consists of providing trendy, highly fashionable products.<sup>31</sup> In fashion retailing, due to the short selling season, the markdown ratio is relatively high compared to other industries. A study conducted by Bain & Co.

Estimated the industry average markdown ratio at approximately 50%<sup>32</sup> and average forced end-of-season markdown is 10-25%.<sup>33</sup>

As consumers learn the retailers' markdown practice and become wiser through easy access to sales information via the internet, more and more consumers wait for sales and refuse to pay full price. Therefore, the profitability of the fashion business is a matter of selling it through at full price.<sup>34</sup> Jin et al. suggested four tactics to induce strategic consumers to purchase products at full price:<sup>35</sup>

- Supply low quantities: this tactic makes the consumer think the item is in short supply and obliges them to buy the item while it is still in the store and thus the retailer avoids markdowns.

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Cachon and Swinney, 778.

<sup>32</sup> Donald Sull and Stefano Turconi, "Fast fashion lessons," *Business Strategy Review*, Vol. 19, no.2 (2008): 4.

<sup>33</sup> Fisher, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Jin et al., 200

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

- Promote affordable full prices to encourage consumers to pay the initial price.
- Offer trendy fashion items with a short life cycle
- Offer new items twice a week, meaning no replenishment of same items.

### **3. Fast Fashion and Supply Chain Management (SCM)**

Fast fashion, and its associated pressure on lead time reduction, has links with supply chain management.<sup>36</sup> This model is based on vertical integration or on a shift from Far Eastern suppliers to those closer to the domestic market. However, this business model is somehow different from existing supply chain management models like: JIT and QR.<sup>37</sup>

Fast fashion has received little attention in the academic research and some authors relate it to some aspects of SCM models in particular: QR and agility<sup>38</sup>. Barnes and Lea-Greenwood consider fast fashion as an advance in supply chain management theory and different to existing models of supply chain management as it is a completely consumer driven process.<sup>39</sup> A study that was developed by these two authors shows that fast fashion has an impact on the supply chain:<sup>40</sup>

- Retailer Power: retailers no longer carry stock and work with producers able to deliver them new products very quickly.
- Shift in partnership and networks: fast fashion puts more pressure on the supply chain due to increasing the number of suppliers used by retailers in order to respond to diverse and frequently changing demand.
- Suppliers under increased pressure: suppliers are experiencing more and more pressure to be more flexible and reactive to changing demand.
- Elimination of stages in the supply chain: to ensure a better reactivity to consumer demand, product development and quality control are being eliminated from the supply chain process.
- Emergence of fast fashion sourcing regions: some regions have emerged as strong regions for delivering fast fashion products, because of their geographical and cultural proximity. These regions focus on some

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<sup>36</sup> Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 262.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 266.

- particular products (items with a high demand during the season or sales tests of small series) and on a high availability of raw materials.
- Shorter production runs: flexibility and reactivity to consumer demand lead to shorter production runs. Consequently, retailers shift their orders to more nearby flexible suppliers who produce small batches.
  - Changing logistics: pressure on speed to market, advances in technology and changing economics have enabled innovation in shipping, resulting in shorter shipping times. Air freight has become the standard in the fast fashion supply chain to the extent that there are changing priorities in buying decisions regarding speed and profit margins.

#### 4. Zara Case

For a better understanding of the Fast Fashion Model, a literature review has been made by analyzing some scientific articles that have discussed this model. The aim of our methodology is to draw up an original synthesis on what has been already done<sup>41</sup> and to elaborate new research opportunities.<sup>42</sup>

ZARA is a brand that belongs to the Spanish group INDITEX. It was established in 1975 and it has more than 2000 stores in 87 countries with almost 120,000 employees. ZARA is the main driver of the development of INDITEX and plays a major role in increasing its share of sales in particular ZARA's international activities.<sup>43</sup>

In 1990, ZARA began to open new stores outside of Spain and has also invested in production logistics, information technology, implemented the Just In Time system, the acquisition of a 130,000 m<sup>2</sup> warehouse near the headquarters in Arteixo and an advanced communication system to connect the headquarters to the buying centre and production and stores.<sup>44</sup>

The development of IT solutions (logistics, retailing, finance, merchandising ...) continued during the 1990s and most of this has been developed

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<sup>41</sup> Estelle M. Phillip and Derek S. Pugh, "How to get a PhD: A handbook for students and supervisors," Berkshire: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2005, 65.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Hart, "Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination," London: Sage Publications, 1998), 52.

<sup>43</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 9.

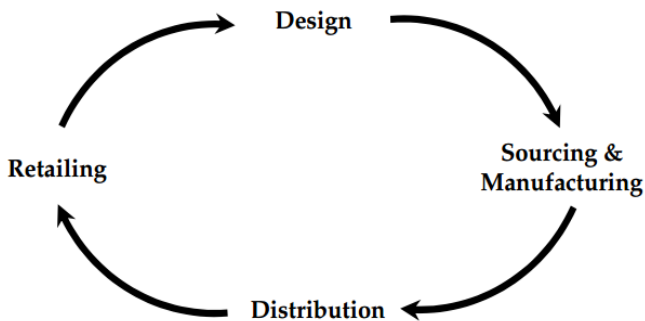
<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

internally because this in-house software development is required by ZARA's specific needs.<sup>45</sup>

Consequently, the resulting business system was particularly distinctive in that Zara manufactured its most fashion-sensitive products internally<sup>46</sup>. Unlike its rivals, more than 50% of ZARA's production is based in Europe<sup>47</sup>. Both internal and external productions pass through the central distribution warehouse.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, ZARA's success is explained by its agile supply chain efficiency.<sup>49</sup> ZARA's supply chain can be divided into four elements: product design, sourcing and production, distribution & retailing (Figure 4.1).

Figure 2: Zara's Business Model<sup>50</sup>



#### 4.1 Product design

The main task of the design team is not only in product innovation, but also in reorganizing existing product elements and transforming them into new

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew McAfee, Vincent Dessain and Anders Sjöman, "Zara: IT for fast fashion," Cambridge: Harvard Business School, 2007, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 42

<sup>47</sup> Ton Dessain, Zeynep Ton and Helena Corsi, "Zara: managing stores for fast fashion," Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 2012, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Sull and Turconi, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 47, 30

products.<sup>51</sup> In other words, ZARA's design team works not only on designs of the upcoming season but also on updating the current season designs. The design team is composed from designers, market specialists and buyers who design almost 40,000 items per year from which 10,000 items are selected for production.<sup>52</sup> Designs are inspired from different sources: exhibitions & fairs, podiums, magazines.<sup>53</sup>

## 4.2 Sourcing and production

ZARA purchases the fabric and other raw materials from external suppliers with the help of its buying centres (in Barcelona and Hong Kong) and the buying team at the headquarters<sup>54</sup>. Key criteria for the buying decision are: required level of reactivity and expertise, efficiency with regard to the costs and the existence of sufficient production capacity<sup>55</sup>. COMDITEL, INDITEX's subsidiary, is in charge of most of the fabric sourcing, dealing with more than 200 external suppliers.<sup>56</sup>

ZARA produces half of its production in its own twenty-two Spanish small companies and uses subcontractors for sewing operations. The other half of the production is made by external suppliers, 70% of them are based in Europe (in particular Spain and Portugal) which allows ZARA to ensure a quick response to its fashion item orders.<sup>57</sup> From Asia, Zara procures basic items because of costs and quality advantages<sup>58</sup>.

ZARA closely supervises subcontractors' operations to guarantee quality, compliance with labour law and especially the adherence to production plans.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Qinghua Zhang, "Analysis on the successful case of efficient supply chain in ZARA," in *Proceedings of 4th International Conference on Wireless Communications, Networking and Mobile Computing (WiCOM'08), March 2, 2008*, (Dalian: IEEE, 2008), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Kasra Ferdows, Michael Lewis and Jose AD Machuca, "Zara," *Supply Chain Forum: An International Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (2003), 64.

<sup>53</sup> Zhang, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Ferdows, Lewis and Machuca, 64

<sup>56</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Ferdows, Lewis and Machuca, 64.

<sup>58</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Ferdows, Lewis and Machuca, 65.

### 4.3 Distribution

Zara's system consists of an approximately 400,000 m<sup>2</sup> facility located in Arteixo and much smaller satellite centres in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico that consolidate shipments from Arteixo.<sup>60</sup> The finished clothes, after being packed and inspected for quality, are sent to the distribution centre through an underground conveyer belt.<sup>61</sup>

Operating hours follow the weekly rhythm of the orders: In a normal week, the warehouse functions around the clock for four days but runs for only one or two shifts on the remaining three days. Ordinarily, 1200 people fill the orders, each within eight hours. But during peak seasons, the company adds as many as 400 temporary staffers to maintain lead times.<sup>62</sup> Shipments from the warehouse are made twice a week to each store via third-party delivery services, with shipments two days a week to one part of the store network and two days a week to the other.<sup>63</sup>

Distributions will be carried out according to orders from each shop; goods will be delivered within 8 hours of receipt of orders.<sup>64</sup> Shipments reach most European stores in twenty-four hours, U.S. stores in forty-eight hours, and Japanese shops in seventy-two hours.<sup>65</sup>

### 4.4 Retailing

In-depth marketing studies are made to select the locations of ZARA's stores. ZARA tries to locate its stores in the most refined, prestigious and most populous places.<sup>66</sup>

Zara has three independent product lines: women's, men's, and children's. Each is managed by a separate team of regional managers, commercials, and designers. At each store, the three product lines are managed by three independent sections managers, each with a team of sales people and cashiers; the women's section manager is also the overall store manager.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ton, Corsi and Dessain, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Zhang, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Ferdows, Lewis and Machuca, 65.

<sup>66</sup> Ghemawat and Nueno, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Ton, Corsi and Dessain, 3.

An average store is 1200 m<sup>2</sup> in size and carries about 40,000 units of inventory, but stores vary greatly in size and layout. Zara puts a lot of emphasis on creating attractive interior designs that convey freedom and quiet comfort to the customer but also on ensuring that merchandise and shop windows are presented similarly in all Zara stores<sup>68</sup>.

Sales information from each ZARA shop is sent to head office and replenishment orders are made twice every week in accordance with the current inventory and sales situation.<sup>69</sup>

## 5. Moroccan Fast Fashion Model

The apparel industry is an important part of the Moroccan manufacturing industry and it is ranked first among process industries since it is part of nearly every industrial indicator. The apparel industry underwent constant development from 1994 to 1999 but this was followed by a relatively difficult situation in 2000/2001 which resulted in the closure of several companies and significant job losses. Furthermore, this industry was the most dynamic exporter, with AED 30.5 billion in 2009, which is about 40% of the total exports of all the industrial companies. Nevertheless, exports decreased in 2013 to only AED 15.47 billion.<sup>70</sup>

New customer requirements in terms of newness, uniqueness and fashion products have developed a market short-circuit and reassortment. In order to fill these new requirements correctly, the industry has shifted progressively toward a fashion industry that consists of two key factors: mastering the Fast Fashion Model and bringing solutions to boost actualization and short-term orders.<sup>71</sup>

The domestic market is undergoing rapid growth. The market dynamic attracts international brand franchisees but we also noticed the emergence of Moroccan retail brands, such as: Flou Flou, Diamantine and Marwa.

Different actions have been made by the government, one of whose objectives is to promote national brands and support their development. We

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Zhang, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Moroccan Department of Industry, *Fiche A/S Secteur Textile*, Rabat: Moroccan Department of Industry, 2011, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 3.

cite, the National Pact of Industrial Emergence (PNEI) 2009-2015. This pact aimed to develop the domestic market by<sup>72</sup>:

- Developing modern distribution around five national distribution networks: these networks will be developed either by apparel companies or by the main Moroccan distribution brands, with the possibility to conclude joint-ventures between the two categories.
- Developing ten national brands either by existing companies in the Textile and Leather sector or by new entrepreneurs (for example: creative, designers).
- To attain these objectives, the government mobilised a financing instrument for SMEs, especially *Imtiaz*, *Moussanada* and les “*Fonds Publics/Privés*.”<sup>73</sup>

In June 2013, the “Textile Plan 2025” was launched by the Moroccan Association of the Apparel Industry (AMITH). This five-level plan aims to go from an atrophied sector to a horizontally integrated, innovative and competing branch<sup>74</sup>:

- Implement an innovative and responsible approach to address the informal sector issue.
- Regenerate actors around a balanced approach: attract new actors and reinforce the existing industrials.

In April 2014, the government replaced the PNEI by the emergence strategy with performing ecosystems. This new strategy will be underpinned around ten key measures and we mention here the most important ones:

- Create a new dynamic and relation between major groups and SMEs.
- Reinforce the industry in recruiting, especially for young people.
- Implement industrial parks for renting that will be more accessible.

These actions will help apparel SMEs overcome difficulties, but they are not enough to develop a Moroccan Fast Fashion Model.

In fact, a supply chain diagnosis is important; it should highlight four essential points. First, the reinforced power of retailers in the supply chain

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<sup>72</sup> « Pacte National d'ÉMERGENCE Industrielle », AMITH, <http://www.amith.ma/portail/pagefr.aspx?id=135>

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> « Actualités », AMITH, <http://www.amith.ma/portail/NewFR.aspx?id=158>



since they put pressure on manufacturers. Then, measure the partnership and trust level among the supply chain actors. This is so important for the actors sharing valuable information. The third point is to identify the non-added value activities. In fact, retailers and their suppliers could eliminate some of the supply chain stages in order to have the right product in stores quickly. Finally, the diagnosis would highlight the suppliers' flexibility to deliver the desired variety of products in the requested quantity.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Fast Fashion Model, of which ZARA is the leader, has revolutionized the world apparel industry. In this article, we looked at the state of play of the Fast Fashion Model and its elements. In addition, we reviewed Zara's business model that allows it to deliver new collections to its stores every fifteen days and to stay tuned to fashion trends.

We have also discussed the main actions taken by the Moroccan government to promote the development of local brands in order to compete with international brands. We judge these actions to be insufficient for SMEs operating in the apparel industry to implement the Fast Fashion Model adequately.

The Fast Fashion Model is not well known in academic research, our article aims to contribute to research on the fast fashion and supply chain management topic. Other issues such as the evaluation of the model's maturity in the Moroccan apparel supply chain could be developed.

# CRISIS COMMUNICATION: A MANAGEMENT TOOL SUPPORTING A COMPANY'S BRAND IMAGE

NAJIA BEDOUI<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In a world of excess, high technology, political, economic, social and environmental context in constant turmoil, do private and public organizations from various sectors face crisis situations or crisis of communication? Are they fit to manage those “incidents” or do they wait for their occurrence before improvising? Who manages those crises? Who decides on the public interventions? How are the transmitted messages structured? Is it a codified and independent branch of studies or only a punctual part of the communication strategy that adapts itself regarding the situation? What is the role of the media in amplifying or reducing the crisis effect induced? Is it simple to communicate when facing ambiguity? Shall we create scarcity of information or over inform? How should we deal with the premises of the crisis? What are the drawbacks of bad management, denial or avoidance of crisis communication? This paper will bring synthesized answers and will distinguish regarding the case studies between the communication of economic, social and political crisis. But before that, it is necessary to point out the edges of a “crisis”.

### **1. From the incident to the crisis: How does the transformation occur?**

To answer the previous question, it is necessary to limit the concept of “crisis.” Generally, it is confused with the concept of “risk,” “major risk” or “disaster.” The notion of “risk” was introduced for the first time in 1981, by Patrick Lagadec in his book *the risk civilization: A technological disaster and social responsibility*. Widely debated and the subject of many scientific studies, this concept would develop and mutate to the idea of “major risk.”

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<sup>1</sup> ENCG EL Jadida - Université Choaib Doukkali

The next developments led to the concept later being developed as a “disaster”. Major “risks” exist in two forms: technological risks (spying, hacking, security breaches) and natural risks (earthquakes and floods). If these two types of major “risks” happen simultaneously, a considerable disaster takes place and is described by experts as a risk “event.” A high level of risk is related to the level of uncertainty and the probability of occurrence. This situation happens when physical and intangible assets are at stake, as well as when human lives or security is exposed to threats. It may lead to a disaster that can weaken vulnerable organizations (Beucher, Reghezza and Veyret, 2004: 23-24).

Until the 1970s, the concept of disaster for Americans was something happening to a community, which left more than thirty victims and resulted in triggering a reaction. Therefore, it refers to an unpredicted and brutal event whose damages exceed society’s acceptable threshold. To this basket, two major elements were added during the 1980s: the “crisis” and the “accident.” This concept identification would last until the 1990s before evolving. In fact, we will move from an understanding that conceives the crisis as providence and therefore fatality, to a meaning that involves a well-built process and deeply thought strategies. Thus, experienced professionals will manage the crisis, predict it and avoid its impacts. Their role is to take timely decisions and even take advantage of potential turbulences that may result from it.

During the last decade, some researches in communication and information science had stressed the major role that communication plays in crisis situations. This emphasis explains our desire to study this concept using the communication science point of view.

## **2. From crisis situation to a crisis communication**

Used to describe events and various phenomenon, it is necessary to ask ourselves if the term crisis “generalization does not involve an ideological function that overthrow a complex and new problematic”. (Barus-Michel, Giust-Desprairies, Ridet, 1996: p. 12). Yet, there is not only one description of crisis but many in reality. Reducing this diversity of meanings to an abstract one, may limit the concept and thus the understanding. Linking them to a given context is the only way that allows getting closer to the actual meaning and understanding all its ramifications. Thus said, we stay loyal to the vision that makes the crisis a process which puts light on a succession of dysfunctions affecting in the short- or long-term many aspects of a company. They may threaten the very existence of the firm.

Crisis and decision-making are two inseparable parts. In fact, the actual etymology of the word “crisis,” says a lot about the relationship between these two concepts. Derived from the Greek term “Krisis” which means “decision”, it described a response to a given situation. Later, the word “crisis” progressively lost its original meaning. Today it has transformed to a description of the situation in itself.

The origin of a crisis could be either due to more or less sudden perturbations from the internal or external environment of an organization, or resulting from harmful phenomena that are difficult to spot but lead to wide range perturbations. A. Maurois compared it to a sickness...

“There are illnesses that start slowly, with mild and convergent queasiness. Some others burst in one night, with violent fevers.” Climat, 1.8 cited by Robert, Synonym given for the entry “Crisis”.

Under the effect of internal or external triggering events, the process of a crisis will arise from a number of dysfunctions that affect either the company, human well-being, the product, sustainability or the environment. It is necessary to quickly initiate a crisis communication process if one of these elements appears:

- The recurrence of relatively serious acts that create a climate of tensions and turbulences
- A serious incident resulting in breakdown situations: suicide, earthquake, accident
- Personal or environmental damage
- Disruption of the business process
- Increasing interest of media
- Damage to the company and its brand image, etc.

### **The objectives:**

Crisis communication is brought to answer a number of objectives:

- Anticipating and avoid crises
- Preventing incidents from mutating into a crisis
- Attenuating the crisis
- Preventing a crisis from becoming a disaster
- Providing the opportunity for a favorable outcome to a crisis
- Preserving the credibility of the company and its brand

Crisis communication is a type of communication which is based on analysis and research. Nothing is left to providence, and the techniques and strategies are carefully thought through. It is done by professionals and responds to the necessity of rigor and pragmatism. This results in the diversity of approaches that have covered this topic.

### **3. The different approaches to the concept of crisis**

#### **3.1 Approach by role**

When communication is considered as the only way a company can manage a crisis and push itself quickly out of the situation. It should be able to reduce damage to a minimum and contribute to improving the brand image. The Tylenol crisis, which happened in the US, is the best illustration of this approach. During this event, a disturbed person added cyanide to pharmaceutical capsules which resulted in seven casualties. The firm directly recognized the mistake and retired all the products from the market. The management of the company made public excuses to the families of victims. They even installed an inviolability system on the incriminated capsules.

#### **3.2 Approach by strategy**

This refers to the sufficient relationship that a company develops with its partners, meaning: employees, consumers, clients, users, partners, political personalities, relevant authorities, media, stockholders... If at the moment of crisis the firm provides transparency and the necessary information that partners are waiting for, the crisis will tail off by itself.

#### **3.3 Approach by challenge**

The crash of the Rio–Paris Air France flight in 2009 is a perfect example of this approach. The plane had disappeared from the radar and nobody knew where it could be found. The stakeholders, meaning the families in distress, were waiting for a compassionate and informative communication. However, while searching for the wreckage, the company didn't have much news to provide and could not announce theories that could not be verified. The difficulties in responding to the requirements of the authorities increased the level of the crisis and led to it being overwhelming.

### **3.4 Approach by categories**

This consists of considering crisis communication in the same way as other forms of communication that exist in a company, such as internal, media, financial, environmental, legal communication etc. It is the type of communication that will allow to anticipate the crisis, analyze the different processes involved, and build a preventive strategy that include a simulation and professional reports to the media.

It is mandatory for companies to react quickly during incidents. It should be the first to communicate and the only interlocutor with the media and the public. It is about being the first to provide a correct and precise answer to questions that torment them. The “zero” information or denying may only worsen the situation, which gives a primordial role to crisis communication.

## **4. The crisis communication role**

Crisis communication can have many roles, such as:

### **4.1 The role of anticipation**

Implementing crisis communication offers the company the means and tools to analyze and manage upstream risks related to each stakeholder of the company. The objective is to identify their needs, expectations and the associated risks in a preventive perspective in order to not transform an incident into a declared crisis.

### **4.2 The role of information**

The example of the thirty-three Chilean miners trapped in a mine for several weeks in 2010, illustrates this role. Although dramatic, this situation could have been worse if the Chilean government had ignored the incident. On the contrary, in the first minutes, officials took the floor and informed the families, the media and the country " miners are trapped but they are alive... we will do everything to get them out, but it will take a lot of time. They chose to reassure, to give and disseminate the right information, the right message at the right time and toward the right stakeholders. International media played a vital supporting role to the affected families.