



Succeeding in the fashion industry:

How can fashion brands build a successful and future-proof wholesale strategy?

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Introduction

Creating the ideal fashion wholesale strategy

Fashion brands need to think and act more innovatively. While this can apply to many areas, this is especially applicable to fashion wholesale. The system of selling clothes through fashion fairs, tradeshow and showrooms has long been outdated. These methods are simply unsuitable for the current state of our world. Instead, a hybrid of offline and online methods should be considered to create an ideal and future-proof fashion wholesale strategy. While new digital-only options might seem promising, they are inappropriate on their own due to the nature of the fashion and textile industry. Buyers need to be able to touch, see and feel the garments to make well-informed buying decisions, especially when it comes to adding new brands to their portfolio.

An innovative option to consider would be the introduction of a collection box. The collection box is a highly convenient and cost-effective way to achieve the best of both worlds. Not only can it be easily combined with other existing sales methods, but it also overcomes all digital limitations. Buyers are able to view a brand's collection in the convenience of their own time and surroundings without the need for in-person appointments. Most importantly, this allows brands to let their creations speak for themselves, which is the most convincing way to sell a collection, whilst being able to expect the buyer's full attention. The collection box and overall BjörnBox solution guarantees any fashion brand higher turnover, lower costs by gaining full control over their sales channel.



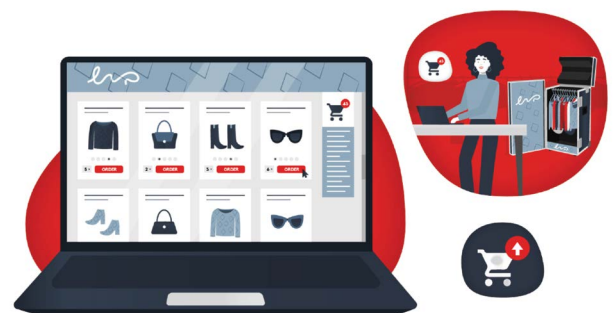
An urgent need for innovation and adaptability in fashion wholesale

The fashion industry is facing a serious problem. And that is not just the industry in and of itself - it includes every single actor connected to its immense network. Whether that may be brand owners, designers, buyers, manufacturers, or the sales team - all are affected by the inability of the fashion industry to embrace necessary change and innovation.

The increase of technological developments, the growing need to act more sustainably and, at last, the outbreak of a global pandemic, are all concerns that question the industry's slow adaptability, seasonality, and traditional ways (Business of Fashion, 2020). It is long overdue for the fashion industry and all its actors to wake up and adapt to the current state of the world.

An enormous shift to e-commerce can already be detected (Reuters, 2021). Currently, within fashion marketing and advertising, appropriate levels of innovation can be observed as an effort to attract a younger target audience. This includes measures, such as the development of video games (Bloomberg, 2021) and the adaption of NFTs (non-fungible tokens) and Augmented Reality have been explored (Nanda, 2021).

The B2B wholesale dimension, however, has been completely neglected. To this day, all traditional methods, including sales representatives, showrooms, and trade shows are still being utilised with hardly any adaption. This is fatal for the fashion industry. Not only does this lead to high inefficiency and unnecessary costs, but also does it hinder fashion brands to successfully navigate through a global pandemic. To say the least, more awareness needs to be raised around this issue along with exploring options to tackle these obstacles. It is time to give fashion brands the opportunity to create a timely, appropriate and efficient wholesale strategy to showcase their collections to the fullest potential.





Providing appropriate solutions for actors of the fashion industry

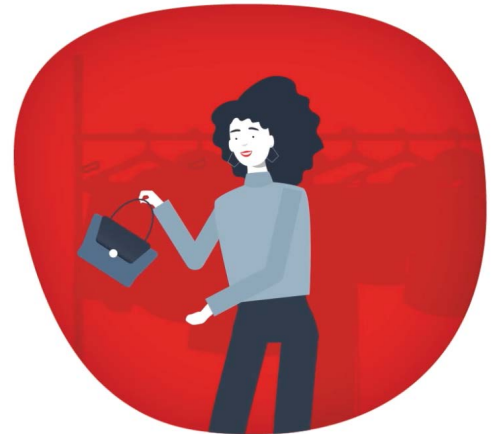
The findings of this white paper are particularly relevant for fashion brands that have established or are considering expanding their B2B wholesale channel. Naturally, only a fashion wholesale strategy that is fit for the future will be considered. In order to provide appropriate recommendations, current challenges and their future implications for actors in the fashion industry will be discussed thoroughly, including the pitfalls of traditional fashion wholesale strategies. Not to underestimate are the possibilities and limits of technological developments within the fashion industry and ways to overcome them. Lastly, with these findings, actors of the industry may expand their network without relying on the strict fashion schedule dictated by trade shows and fashion fairs and all the while increasing their sales numbers and lowering their costs.



The Pitfalls of Traditional Fashion Wholesale

Creating a fashion wholesale strategy

When it comes to creating a wholesale strategy, fashion brands can choose to do so internally through a sales team and employing sales representatives, or externally by contracting distributors or sales agents. Determining the best option will vary from brand to brand. Regardless of the option decided on, it is crucial to set a strategy on how to reach both current buyers and potential prospects in the most effective and efficient way.



The ideal wholesale strategy will allow brands to

- Showcase their collection in person, allowing buyers to see, feel and touch the garments
- Reach all of their current buyers to ensure customer retention
- Reach as many potential customers as possible to increase their network
- Have flexibility, both regarding time and location
- Facilitate personal communication, preferably in person
- Showcase their collection to its fullest potential despite distances and meeting restrictions, e.g. caused by COVID
- Give their buyers enough time to view the collection to make an informed and well-considered order
- Strengthen their individual branding
- Be as cost-effective per reached customer as possible
- Be as sustainable in their undertakings as possible

Sales Representatives & Agents - On the road with the collection

Firstly, working with sales representatives (internally employed) and agents (externally contracted) is one of the most traditional ways to showcase a fashion collection. In return for a commission and agreed rate, representatives and agents will personally visit chosen buyers, ideally several located in the same area one after another. While this allows for personal communication and is highly convenient for buyers, this traditional method tends to be rather time-consuming and excludes reaching potential customers (see table 1).

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + personal face-to-face communication + buyers don't have to travel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - potential schedule conflicts, not being able to see several buyers on the same day - no contact with potential customers outside of the current network - highly time-consuming for reps, agents and buyers - suitable vehicle needed - high costs - agents/ reps have to be located nearby or else organise an entire trip - buyers have to fit in the appointments into their busy schedule which can be especially challenging when sales reps visit their stores - buyers often need to make their buying decisions straight away under the pressure of the sales rep - not COVID-friendly

Table 1 - Working with sales representatives and sales agents

Showrooms - Personal Invitation for buyers

Secondly, the collection may also be set up in a dedicated showroom with buyers making appointments to visit the showroom instead of the other way around. This bears similar advantages (see table 2) to working with sales representatives as outlined previously. In addition, the full collection can be presented neatly with all branding considerations taken into account. Nonetheless, it still bears disadvantages, hindering a brand to showcase its collection to its fullest potential.



Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ personal face-to-face communication+ collection can be arranged and presented neatly+ dedicated space+ more flexible scheduling options+ space to showcase a full collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- potential inconvenient travel time and costs for buyers- no contact with potential customers outside of the current network- suitable space needed- relying on the willingness of buyers to visit the showroom- not COVID-friendly

Table 2 - Working with a showroom

Trade Shows - Showcasing at an industry event

Additionally, trade shows and fashion fairs may be attended to present one's collection. These major industry events allow brands or their chosen representatives to showcase their new collections while providing networking opportunities with buyers, the press and fellow brands. Compared to solely working with sales reps and showrooms, this opens up more opportunities to also reach new potential customers (see table 3). Although traditionally, this seemed to promise high exposure and a good return on investment, its effectiveness in today's landscape has diminished.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ personal face-to-face communication+ collection can be arranged and presented neatly+ networking opportunity to reach current buyers, potential customers, fellow brands and press contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- inconvenient travel time on all sides- high costs to rent a stand- high pressure on staff attending and organising- set location- set time- brand might get lost amongst other brands

Table 3 - Attending Trade Shows & Fashion Fairs



Challenges for Fashion Wholesale - an Outdated System?



Withstanding the Test of Time

Now after considering all three main traditional wholesale methods, their relevance, effectiveness and efficiency in today's context will be explored in more detail.



Navigating the Rigid Fashion Schedule

Although following the fashion schedule has been the norm for decades, many indicators suggest that this system may be outdated. Traditionally, luxury brands were the one's to adopt the system of seasonal collections which has defined and influenced the entire fashion industry. In this context, showcasing collections twice a year is fairly reasonable. However, with the rise of fast fashion and its anti-movement of slow fashion, this schedule simply does not seem to be suitable anymore.

On one hand, fashion seasons have shortened tremendously with an increase in more frequent yet smaller collections and drops (Business of Fashion, 2019). With an observed trend towards higher reactivity and flexibility, the traditional slow bi-annual pace does not fulfil the needs of the industry anymore. On the other hand, the rise of slow fashion encourages the creation of seasonless collections which is challenging to merge with the traditional season-based schedule. The system further does not allow space for showcasing never-out-of-stock (NOOS) collections that are imperative for the brand's handwriting, especially when approaching a new potential customer. The need for more flexible and frequent showcasing opportunities becomes very evident.



The Culture of Instant Gratification

Instant gratification, the "desire to experience pleasure or fulfilment without delay or deferment" (Patel, 2014) is becoming an increasingly apparent influence on society. Es-

pecially the rise of connectivity, instant feedback and its adoption in marketing practices have led to a decrease in patience. Placed in a professional context, buyers have been observed to be increasingly picky about which trade shows to attend (Business of Fashion, 2020) due to a more individualistic and impatient mindset.

In fact, over the past years, the attendance of trade shows has declined tremendously with buyers expressing the inconvenience of being bound to a set place and time, making the experience of viewing new collections a rather stressful one. The costs for attending trade shows, however, have remained the same. To attract more visitors, many trade shows have now begun to introduce strategies to enhance the attendee experience by introducing industry-specific talks and panel discussions (Business of Fashion, 2019).

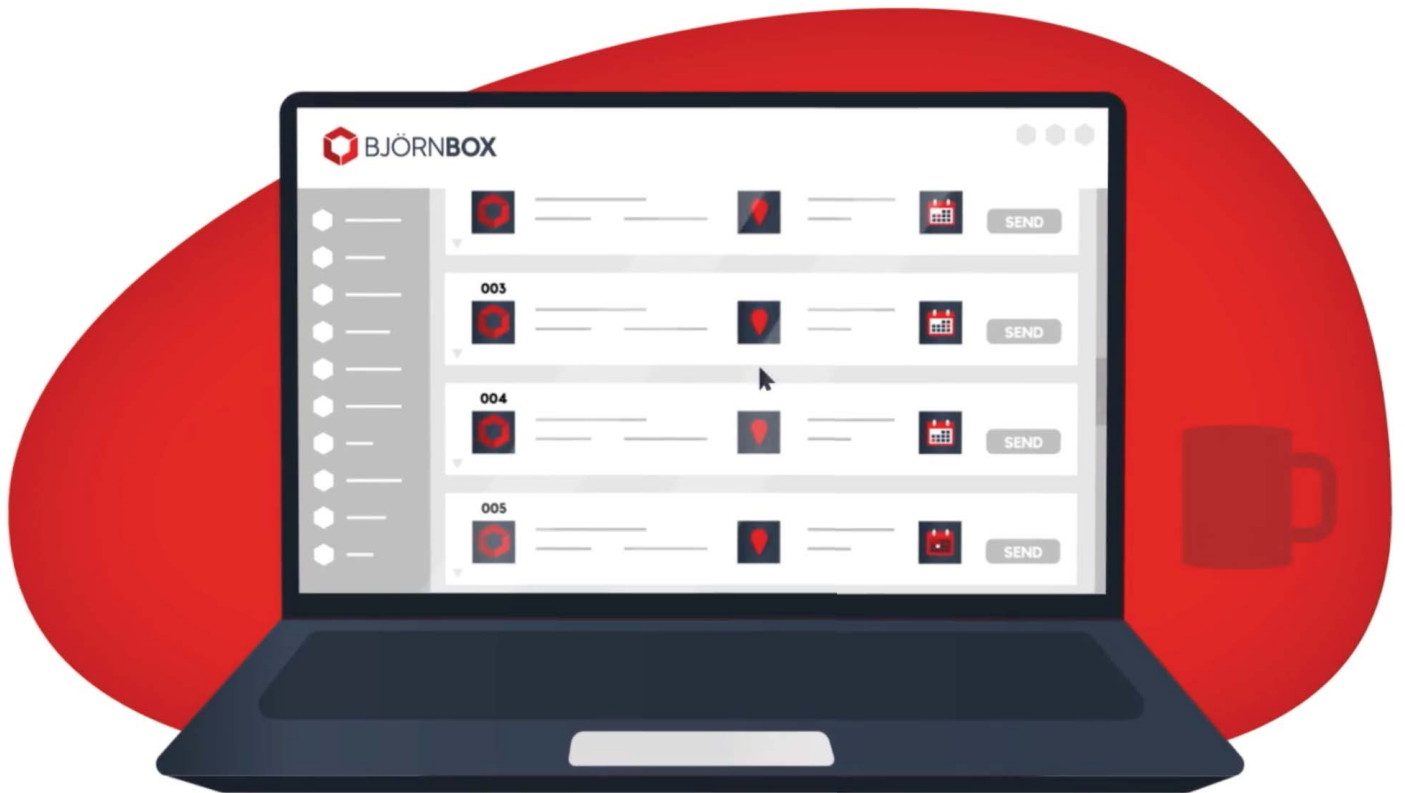
However, an increase in attendance due to industry talks may not necessarily convert potential buyers into customers for brands. Depending on the size of the trade show, buyers are generally more likely to visit pre-selected stands due to their time constraints. Therefore, the potential of meeting prospective customers is decreasing. Overall, this highlights the outdatedness of traditional trade shows and fashion fairs.



The Need for COVID-friendly and fully remote Practices

At last, the outbreak of a global pandemic has posed a great challenge for the entire world, including the fashion industry, disrupting supply chains and causing widespread store closures and job cuts worldwide (Kansara, 2020). Naturally, it has further caused the cancellation of major industry events including fashion shows, trade shows and fashion fairs. With travel plans on hold, lockdowns in place, and meeting restrictions in order, fashion sales have plummeted, both on a Business-to-Business and Direct-to-Consumer basis.

It is clear that the fashion industry has been built on traditional large-scale and in-person approaches, which has made the change to working fully remotely a difficult one, especially compared to other industries. Nonetheless, the pandemic may be considered as a catalyst for digital adaptations, enabling innovation and efficiency in new ways. In order to survive the crisis and continue to thrive in a post-pandemic world, increasing the levels of agility and flexibility are crucial (Business of Fashion, 2020). More digital and remote-friendly options are therefore essential to consider.



Exploring the Digital Space

The Trend of Going Digital

As remarked by Blanco-Espuny, while under normal circumstances digital transformation is expected to take as long as four years, the pandemic has sped up its development within the fashion industry to three to four months (Fernandez, 2020). While the Direct-to-Consumer level has been especially quick to react, driven from a strategic marketing point of view to reach certain target audiences, the fashion wholesale level has been significantly slower to explore and grow within the digital space.

Live Streaming: A Digital Alternative to showrooms and trade shows

In order to recreate a physical showroom and trade show experience, a number of digital solutions have been sought out. Firstly, live streaming (see table 4) has turned into a popular method to present one's collections. According to Grand View Research (2021), "the global video streaming market size was valued at USD 50.11 billion in 2020" with further tremendous growth within the coming years to be expected. Live streaming has, in fact, been proven to be a highly effective marketing strategy as it allows direct and authentic communication with the brand's target audience (Bybyk, 2020). While this has shown much success on a Direct-to-Consumer basis, the same can be expected on a Business-to-Business level. On an international scale, this method can be highly effective as it facilitates brands to reach buyers that would not attend a trade show physically. Therefore, this undertaking may even lead to an increase in B2B sales (Hall, 2020). Compared to organising physical showrooms and trade shows, it further proves to be more time-efficient with only one take being necessary to capture an entire presentation and explanations. Nonetheless, it neither supports personal and tailored communication nor does it allow buyers to touch or feel the garments.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Highly efficient as one recorded live streaming session can reach an unlimited amount of buyers+ Reach a wider audience+ Sustainable option, making travel unnecessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- No personal communication- Buyers can't touch or feel the garment- Equipment and technological know-how needed

Table 4 - Live Streaming

B2B Platforms: a digital alternative to in-person wholesale business

Although digital wholesale buying platforms were available prior to the pandemic, it was times of uncertainty that has put them in the spotlight. With traditional in-person wholesale business not being an option, an increasing amount of brands are taken full advantage of B2B platforms. These platforms (see table 5) connect brands with buyers and retailers and offer the opportunity to showcase collections digitally, similar to regular e-commerce platforms. As Macmillan, a wholesale and operations manager has expressed, due to the pandemic, some brands are now even fully relying on digital platforms to manage their B2B business (Lieber, 2020). With the growing number of digital wholesale buying platforms available, it is up to brands to research, test and select the right ones to connect to their target audience.

To improve the commerciality of products, some platforms may offer additional digital solutions. This can, for instance, include a virtual showroom with the option to implement detailed photos and videos of the collection, and the support of interactive 3D imagery and 360-degree-technology (BOF Studio, 2021). However, even with these advanced options available, brands may not be able to utilise them to their fullest potential (Biondi, 2020). It is a highly time-consuming task to facilitate high-quality and detailed imagery and videos that are able to show and convey a brand's collection, including colours, fabrics and delicate details. Naturally, it also requires specific skillsets that may not be readily available nor feasible to all brands.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Reach wider audience globally+ Sustainable option, making travel unnecessary+ Use of 3D imagery and 360-degree-technology+ Customisable platform+ Valuable data available	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- No personal communication- Buyers can't touch or feel the garment- Highly reliant on well-produced photos and videos- Highly time-consuming to provide all imagery necessary- Many garments do not translate well on screen

Table 5 - B2B Platforms

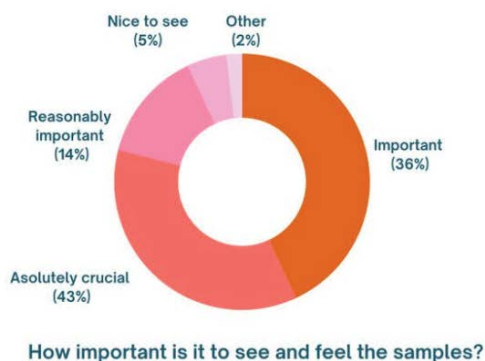
Digital limitations

Despite digital developments and their many advantages, one significant disadvantage remains. Due to the nature of the textile and clothing industry, an immense emphasis is placed on the ability to touch, see and feel garments in real life. In spite of the rapid development of digital alternatives, nothing is quite able to replace the in-person experience. As buyer Shin Masuda explains, “as a buyer, I need to see the actual fabric, hear the actual sound of the cloth and meet the actual people involved in the brands” (O’Connor, 2020). Fashion buying director Tiffany Hsu concurs, expressing how “not being able to touch something is a very big challenge for [buyers]” (Fernandez, 2020). In a survey undertaken by Björn Agency (2021), 43%

of buyers consider seeing and feeling samples as “absolutely crucial” while 36% regard this as “important” (see below).

Furthermore, while switching to digital-only options may be feasible for established brands and their already existing customer base, this presents a significant obstacle for new brands. According to Aroma Xie (Hall, 2020), fewer orders are to be expected from new brands as it comes with a higher risk for buyers to take them on without being familiar with the fabrication, fit and feel of the garments. As Fernandez (2020) suggests, brands need to think about a strategy to approach buyers through a multitude of mediums to ensure trust in and visibility of their collections.

Preferences for samples and buying



BjörnBox Popularity



Introducing the Collection Box - overcoming digital limitations

In order to overcome the digital limitation of not being able to touch, see and feel garments in person, some brands have mailed swatches and samples to their buyers. Extreme Cashmere, for instance, a Dutch cashmere brand had not been able to create digital imagery to authentically represent their new collection. Despite the available advanced technology, the brand resolved to mail a sample of a newly introduced material along with swatches (Fernandez, 2020). This, in fact, is a highly effective way to present a collection. First of all, it allows brands to let their garments speak for themselves. Buyers, on the other hand, can conveniently view and make their buying decisions in their own time and chosen surroundings.

However, while mailing samples to a small group of buyers is a possible and simple enough undertaking, doing the same for an entire sales network that is potentially spread across all borders is highly time-consuming, expensive and hard to manage. The Dutch start-up BjörnBox has addressed this problem sophisticatedly with their innovative collection boxes and software. BjörnBox considers their specifically designed collection boxes as a showroom in a box that can be sent to any buyers, both current and prospective, wherever they may be based. It, therefore, allows full flexibility

and maximum reach, not only in regards to the location but also in terms of time as it can operate outside of the rigid fashion schedule. With the help of their innovative and user-friendly app, the collection boxes can be scheduled to go from one buyer to another, overcoming any potential logistical obstacles. Furthermore, BjörnBox suggests brands to arrange calls with their buyers once they have received their collection box to talk them through the entire collection and answer any questions as if during an in-person appointment. The collection box can then be scheduled to be picked up and sent to the next buyer within the BjörnBox app, encouraging convenience and more attentive viewing times for buyers.

Being able to implement the BjörnBox solution takes away all the hassle that fashion brands would experience otherwise, especially when dealing with traditional sales methods as outlined previously. It simultaneously takes away all the pressure connected to creating picture-perfect online imagery and content as the collection gets to speak for itself. Their philosophy of achieving more turnover and lowering costs by gaining complete control over all sales channels promises a lower-risk undertaking while flexibly reaching a wider audience with important data available at all times.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Buyers can touch, see and feel the garment for themselves + Buyers get to keep the collections for several days + Buyers can place their well-informed orders from the comfort of their own homes + Buyers can be reached across borders + Call can be scheduled flexibly at any time + Not bound to any schedules + Sustainable option, making travel unnecessary + Valuable data available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No personal face-to-face communication

Table 6 - Using the Collection Box



Conclusion

Overall Comparison

Now various fashion wholesale options available have been thoroughly explored, a comparison shall be made. Based on this, recommendations can be given on creating the most effective B2B strategy for any fashion brand wanting to increase their sales. As outlined in the beginning, the ideal fashion wholesale strategy would allow brands to:

- Showcase their collection in person, allowing buyers to see, feel and touch the garments
- Reach all of their current buyers to ensure customer retention
- Reach as many potential customers as possible to increase their network
- Have flexibility, both regarding time and location
- Facilitate personal communication, preferably in person
- Showcase their collection to its fullest potential despite distances and meeting restrictions, e.g. caused by COVID
- Give their buyers enough time to view the collection to make an informed and well-considered order
- Strengthen their individual branding
- Be as cost-effective per reached customer as possible
- Be as sustainable in their undertakings as possible



Taking these factors into account, the low efficiency and outdatedness of traditional methods become very clear (see table 7). However, fashion brands should also avoid relying on digital-only options. Those options are not fit for the fashion industry due to the buyers' needs of seeing, touching and feeling the garments in real life. Therefore, a hybrid of the two, both online and offline business, brings forth an ideal fashion wholesale strategy that can be adopted by all brands. This places the innovative BjörnBox solution with their custom-designed collection boxes and innovative software at the very forefront. This unique concept fits the current state of the world perfectly and offers a promising, convenient and cost-effective way of combining an online and offline strategy. Most importantly, the collection box allows buyers to see collections in real life without the need for travel. An intriguing solution with great benefits for the entire fashion industry, from manufacturers to wholesalers to retailers.

Methods of selling fashion wholesale

	SHOWROOM	TRADESHOW	SALES AGENT	COLLECTION BOX	B2B PLATFORM
% reach showcase collection to customers (live)	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	☆☆☆☆☆
% reach showcase collection to prospects (live)	★☆☆☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	☆☆☆☆☆
Costs per reached customer	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Flexibility/Reactivity in time	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Flexibility/Reactivity in location	★☆☆☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Communication	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★☆☆
total score	2,8	2,8	2,6	4,5	3

Table 7 - Methods of selling fashion wholesale

Building a successful and future-proof wholesale strategy

It is undeniable that innovation and adaptability are imperative for fashion brands to stay relevant and secure a successful future. Even in a post-pandemic world, it is to be expected that implementing digital innovations and technology will become the norm. In order to ensure a successful wholesale strategy, it is, therefore, crucial to re-think traditional wholesale methods, such as showroom appointments, attending trade shows or working with sales representatives. These traditional wholesale methods are high in cost and extremely time-consuming.

The ideal and future-proof fashion wholesale strategy will be a hybrid of offline and online methods. Although digital-only options seem promising at first glance, they are inadequate on their own. The nature of the fashion and textile industry requires buyers to be able to touch, see and feel the garments in order to make well-informed buying decisions. This is especially applicable to new brands in any buyer's portfolio.

Implementing the BjörnBox solution is the most promising and convenient way to uplevel and future-proof any current fashion wholesale strategy. It is a highly convenient and cost-effective option that can easily be combined with other existing sales methods. Above all, the collection box overcomes all digital limitations and allows buyers to see a brand's collection in the convenience of their own time and surroundings without the need for in-person appointments. Most importantly, this allows brands to let their creations speak for themselves, which is the most convincing way to sell a collection, whilst being able to expect the buyer's full attention. Fashion brands are given the opportunity to lower their costs and achieve higher turnover by gaining full control of their sales channels. This allows them not only to sell more but also do so in a convenient and more sustainable fashion.



Recommendations

Altogether, it is recommended that fashion brands

- Reconsider their fashion wholesale strategy and implement more flexible and modern approaches that are adaptable to their schedule as opposed to the traditional fashion schedule
- Introduce a hybrid of digital and offline methods to build the ideal wholesale strategy, with the BjörnBox being a perfect and low-risk solution
- Invest in technical and creative talent to be able to convey their collections on-screen as well as possible
- Do not underestimate the importance and need of showing their collections to buyers in real life, allowing them to touch, see and feel the garments to make a well-informed order



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BjörnBox B.V. | Wilhelminastraat 16, 6812CW | Arnhem, The Netherlands
bjornbox.com | +31645628298 | info@bjornbox.com