



INDUSTRY OVERVIEW: FASHION / RETAIL

What is fashion/retail?

When most people think about retail, they consider only the stores where goods are sold, and often don't think about what happens behind the scenes. When someone says that they work for Macy's, for example, many individuals picture them working behind a register or helping patrons at the store. But what about the corporate headquarters of Macy's, where hundreds of employees work on deciding what products to offer at the stores, when and where to open new stores or close under-performing locations, how to ship the goods on time, and how to ensure the appropriate pricing and inventory at all times?

The retail industry is vast, and encompasses a broad range of businesses which sell products directly to consumers. These goods can be apparel (clothing) or non-apparel (accessories, home furnishings, electronics, etc.). Career paths exist on the business side as well as the design or creative side, and each function requires a different set of skills and requirements. Overall, knowledge of the type of product and target customer is imperative to be successful in the retail field.

Career Tracks

Retail Merchant / Buyer: Retail simply means the sale of goods directly to the consumer. Some retail companies employ designers to make their own labels (such as Abercrombie & Fitch, or The Gap, for example) while other retailers buy clothing from multiple designers and then resell to customers (such as Macy's or Saks Fifth Avenue). Merchandising is the process of selecting the items from the designers to be sold in the stores. Merchants (also called "buyers" in companies that don't employ their own designers) perform competitive analysis to discover fashion trends, review sales data from previous years to predict future sales, and decide how much inventory to purchase. To be successful in merchandising, it's important to have a strong ability to make difficult decisions, stay on top of trends, work well in teams, and be comfortable with numbers. Many companies have buying training programs for entry-level graduates.

Retail Planners: Planners work closely with buyers to plan and control inventories at store locations to maximize sales, inventory, and profit. They analyze past data in order to help predict future sales, which helps the buyer determine the quantities of merchandise to be purchased. They also determine when to place items on sale, which is known as a "mark-down" in the industry. Planners often direct the distribution of goods to achieve store sales, gross margin, and turnover goals. Eventually they can move up the career ladder to become Directors of Distribution and Planning. Individuals interested in entering this field often apply to Planning Development Programs in large retail organizations. Those individuals who have an affinity towards financial forecasting, analysis and allocation, can multitask, are adept at computers, and are astute at business strategy can do well in this field. Planning requires attention to detail as well as the ability to see the broad picture.

Fashion Designer: Fashion designers create new ideas for clothing and accessories from the initial sketch to the finished product. Few designers are fortunate enough to actually get their own line or label, like Donna Karan, Michael Kors, Calvin Klein, etc. Having one's own business is also incredibly hard work, requiring long hours, travel, and a constant finger on the pulse of what's new and trendy. The majority of designers work for a company, often in one particular department such as denim, knits, wovens, dresses, handbags, and others. Moving up the ranks can mean running a department and supervising assistant designers, or eventually becoming the Creative Director for the organization. Higher-level positions involve less of actual designing, and more

formulating high-level strategy and look of a season, editing the work of the assistant designers, and coordinating with other divisions (such as marketing) to communicate the intended image. In addition to creativity and technical design skills, being able to meet deadlines and predict trends are also important to success in the field.

Production and Sourcing: Once designers have sketched out their visions for a garment, they need to have a manufacturing facility produce it. Those who choose a career in production assist with this process, locating the most cost-effective factories while still maintaining a high level of quality. Production personnel source fabrics, negotiate pricing from mills and factories, and work closely with all parties to ensure deadlines are met. They also deal with trouble-shooting when something goes wrong, such as a factory closure, a mistake in the production process, or a delay in shipment. Communication and organization skills are critical for this field.

Fashion Illustrator: Fashion illustrators are artists who make sketches of garments that have been designed and produced by others. These drawings are used for trade publications, catalogs, and magazines. A talent for art and drawing is required for this career.

Fashion Consultant/Stylist: Wardrobe consultants show their clients how to use fashion items to enhance their personal or professional image and help them plan and manage their wardrobe purchases. Stylists are often employed by upscale department stores as “personal shoppers”, as well as by magazines to design a concept for a fashion photo shoot. Photo shoot stylists are responsible for obtaining all clothing and accessories that will be used on a given shoot, dressing the models, and designing the combinations and concept. Fashion consultants can also work as freelancers, charging private individuals for wardrobe assistance.

Fashion Photographer: Fashion photographers take pictures of clothing and accessories, both on and off models, to make the items look visually appealing to consumers. Many photographers are freelance, receiving assignments from magazines and ad agencies.

Fashion Publishing: Those in the fashion publishing sector work at magazines and other publications where they select the items to include in the upcoming issue, coordinate logistics of photo shoots, and develop strategies to make the story or spread appealing to consumers. These positions are extremely competitive and hard to obtain, despite low starting salaries and at times grueling hours. Many entry-level employees in this field have English, journalism, or related degrees. Most entry-level positions at fashion magazines, from spellcheckers to editorial assistant to copy editors, **generally** require previous internship experience and/or industry connections.

Additional Related Occupations

Patternmaker	Sales Manager
Tailor / Dressmaker	Merchandise Manager
Upholsterer	Product Manager
Distribution Manager	Store Planner/Designer
Retail Store Manager	Window Dresser
Regional Manager	Costume Designer
Marketing Manager	Supply Chain Manager
Public Relations Specialist	Quality Assurance Director
Purchasing Agent	

Requirements / Skills

Different areas of fashion require distinct skill sets. To be a designer, one must have technical and art training, leadership, ingenuity, highly-developed patternmaking skills, and an understanding of what is both stylish as well as practical and cost-effective. Design also calls for absolute dedication, as it can be quite competitive and difficult to break through. A degree from a design school is generally needed, though some designers are self-taught.

To be on the business side of fashion, one must be attuned to customers, be comfortable with numbers, have vision and be able to make predictions based on research, and be able to work collaboratively with diverse personality types. An undergraduate degree in any major can allow one to enter the field of retail, though internship experience is essential. For many companies, working at the retail store can be helpful in order to later work on the corporate side. A background in business, marketing, management and merchandising are all helpful.

Salary

Salaries vary depending on type of position, location and size of the organization, and level of experience. Below are some typical ranges, though companies may differ significantly in their compensation structures. Assistant designer positions can literally range from 24,000 up to 48,000, with experienced designers having the potential to earn up to six figures. Buyers/merchandisers starting salaries range from the mid-40s to mid-50s. On the editorial side, the pay is somewhat lower, with positions often starting in the 20s and 30s, though high-level executives for publications can ultimately reach the six figures as well.

Directories

The Fashion Industry by Peter Vogt

Associations

The Fashion Group International (www.fgi.org)
Personal Care Products Council (www.personalcarecouncil.org)
Accessories Council (www.accessoriescouncil.org)
National Retail Federation (www.nrf.com)

Publications

Women's Wear Daily
Home Furnishing News
Accessories Magazine
NY Times Thursday Styles Section

Websites

www.stylecareers.com
<http://freefashioninternships.com>
www.apparelsearch.com
www.FashionJobsCentral.com
www.fashionjobs.com
www.fashioncareercenter.com
www.fibre2fashion.com
www.fashioncenter.com
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www.apparelnews.net
www.fashion.net
www.craigslist.com