

# Luxury Fashion versus a Fast-Fashion Environment\*

Emilio Paschetto\*\*

## Abstract

*The world of fashion seems to be going towards a neurotic fast-fashion speed capable of burning (at dramatic pace) designers' creativity as well as collections lifespan. The never-ending needs for 'newness', recent famous designers resigning by exhaustion or sudden brand deterioration, are proving how monotone seems to be the world of fashion (at any level of price positioning or design proposal). Slowear started more than a decade ago, by playing a different role: The Slowear unmatched and new approach to the business of fashion is strategically different as well as based on culture, heritage and product details, forgetting the obsession of many public groups for quarterly analysis on margins, profits and economics. Slowear shares a business philosophy and culture based on ethical values and approach, contemporary comfort and design projected for everyday use of the best products made by the company.*

**Keywords:** Slowear; High-End Fashion Retail; Business Model; Luxury Management; Global Markets

## 1. The Slowear Credo, Strategy and Direction

In attempting to express the Slowear credo, strategy and direction, I will keep distance from figures, numbers and comparison charts due to the following reasons:

- without any doubt, the unique philosophy expressed by Slowear is not comparable with any other fashion retailer or wholesale company;
- fast growth and turnovers' figures are not always a sincere indicator: they need to be considered together with margins, complete balance sheets and deep strategic details. All of these information is not only private (as the Slowear company is) but also 'too vast' to be able to be presented in an exhaustive way, in such an essay as this one;
- the retail world (especially focussed on apparel) is highly fluid and fragmented: any presentation of worldwide figures would need to be photographed in a short length of time that would dilute the Slowear story while distracting from the Slowear philosophy. Slowear pathway is based on a culture, shared and expressed in our manifesto.

---

\* Invited Article

\*\* Country Manager - Executive VP U.S.A. & Canada, Slowear ([press@slowear.com](mailto:press@slowear.com))

Edited by: ISTEI – University of Milan-Bicocca

ISSN: 1593-0319

Paschetto, E. (2015). Luxury Fashion versus a Fast-Fashion Environment, Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management ([symphonya.unimib.it](http://symphonya.unimib.it)), 4, 40-47.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2015.4.05paschetto>

## 2. The Slowear Way

Slowear is a very special and unique company, especially if considered while observing the fashion world at large, either from the retail point of view, or from the wholesale one. The Slowear business is facing the fashion environment but it is based on a genuine brand integrity: one brand responds perfectly to one purpose only, as a 'one category' product.

The description of the Slowear portfolio of companies (that are the best, at what they do) can start with either brand, Montedoro for instance, established in 1958, as an outerwear player, is part of Slowear since 2003. Glanshirt founded in 1960 was also brought into Slowear at the beginning of the 21st century, while Zanone knitwear was acquired just previously. Incotex trousers, established in 1951, founded the Slowear project since the very beginning: all four brands have been leaders in fabric development, expressing comfort as well as casual elegance. The Slowear family of brands now has a worldwide reputation for clothes with lasting quality and precisely identified image and feel for fabrics and treatments.

We will sup up this interesting process: 'how' Slowear succeeded in a hyper-competitive fast fashion world, while basing its strategy as an antagonising philosophy opposite to 'disposable' or 'fast-fashion'.

Everything starts in Italy for Slowear as often starts in Italy for high-end apparel. The Italian consumer of clothing and fashion products comes from a culture based on a multitude of privately own stores (all over the territory) in which each shop would propose selections of products (brands), based on its unique local sensitivity, while facing a world market saturated by every price point, quality and look.

A saturated market (the whole group of 1st markets like U.S.A., Germany, U.K., Italy, France for instance) is by nature a fast moving environment in which new proposals are in place, as an attempt: as searching tools for new consumption stimulation.

That's probably why, since the 80's, the brand-company through direct stores (mono-brand) started to target the 1st markets (Italy included) during the initial stage of their expansions, competing aggressively against smaller and unique multi-brand privately own shops. European consumers (appreciative of personalities and differences) are resisting more than American ones in dropping small family business in favor of mono-brand company retail stores, however, all along the 90's, the mono-brand stores in Europe, reinforced their presence meanwhile the companies were licensing brands in search of quick turnovers.

I have the tendency to call 'the golden era of fashion' to indicate those years before 2000 in which many factors helped all kind of distribution, all kind of collections and equity sensitive fashion operations. The Slowear origin was conceived on the solid basis of an extremely successful wholesale business pivoting on Incotex trousers (a referring point in the market) in those years. Incotex was already a unique player on the category business due to few undisputable reasons:

- Incotex was (and still is) a collection not focused on exposing evidently the brand on the garment, but a sophisticated 'look and feel';
- Incotex was extremely consistent in providing the highest possible quality in fabrics, details, garment construction, finishing and fit for trousers;

- Incotex was rather indifferent to the so-called 'trends of the season' because the focus was on its precise proposal, consistent in personality, season after season.

Being myself resident in New York, I have the tendency to consider September 11 2001 as the moment in which even our fashion world changed. It was also in my opinion the moment in which the 'golden era of fashion' would start reaching an end. Not much after that moment, the Slowear Company started to operate with its philosophy. It is often when crises hit, that new ideas come to life, finding a new space in the changing environments. At its initial stage, Slowear was the combined proposal of four Italian historical brands (mentioned above: Montedoro outerwear and jackets, Zanone knitwear, Glanshirt and Incotex trousers) via the wholesale channel of distribution for men and women, in high-end fashion/apparel marketplace.

Synchronised by team of professionals, the Slowear portfolio was working for a cohesive proposal towards the final consumer while 'talking the same language' as the private independent retailer.

### **3. The Slowear Wholesale Focus**

The Slowear core (as a new concept that we can compare to a 'curator') started in the wholesale markets more than a decade ago (bear in mind, the family own business was established in 1951 as we said). While many brands were either focusing on a vast mono-brand collection or were developing 'diffusion collections' (diluting the main brand in lower price points tiers), Slowear had the vision to offer (to its clients, the specialty stores) four highly specialised identified collections, with a coherent point of view, divided by category.

At the beginning of the years 2000, many established fashion companies (focused on enhancing one brand only) were spending huge amount of investments in marketing on their label (generically expressed in a 'life-style' complete look). Slowear did not believe in 'one brand answer' as a replay. On the contrary, Slowear approached the conversation by supporting new principals, much more cohesive and capable of demonstrating the high specialisation of the Slowear manifesto.

Incotex for instance was 'the trouser' and the Incotex product, brand, production and company, would have proved the leadership in that category field with its long lasting heritage, legacy and history, with its highest quality and precisely consistent price point and fit, while operating with punctual multiple deliveries, enriched replenishment services and detail oriented capacities. In the same way, every Slowear brand played a leader role 'per category business' in its own field, while the retail clients were starting to see Slowear showroom as an ally, capable of providing the very best per each category product, understanding their business.

At this point, allow me to offer a comparison: imagine yourself booking a table in one of the best restaurants you happens to know. You will order a delicious dinner knowing that the selection available from the menu (in terms of wines, as well as pasta, main courses and desserts) is the very best, together with the espresso coffee at the end. Obviously, every product you will taste comes from a highly specialised supplier; for sure, the brand company producing the wine will not offer the

vegetables as well. Come back now to us, transferring this analogy into the fashion world, you are the client ordering apparel from highly specialised companies four of which are in the Slowear portfolio, while Slowear is a curator, an editor in place also as a guarantor of credibility, of reliability, quality, updated research on materials, business heritage and history.

Moreover, you can easily understand and share the Slowear principles pivoting on decades of specialised high-end ethical business. The core of the success of Slowear as a 'way of living' allowing the company to work with the vast majority of the sophisticated wholesale apparel world markets.

By the year 2008, the Slowear proposal reached every world independent retail store recognised as an established luxury fashion high-end point of sale. Slowear relentlessly applied research for details and quality components: the 'engine' pushing forward the company, season after season, reached out also to those clients braver in daring strong proposals, less classic as a mix of merchandise.

Sensitivity towards the sell out (of the retail's clientele) has always been a highly efficient point of strength for Slowear. Slowear dedicated enormous attention in collaborating with the retail clients by sending Slowear professionals on the clients selling floor to hold product seminars, monitoring the Slowear brands and product exposition. Moreover, Slowear helped its retail's clients with potential replenishment, quick visual merchandising interventions, promotional trunk shows and activities studied and processed on a case-by-case basis. Those 'tailor made' efforts did achieve very beneficial results, showing prominent recognition for Slowear products, labels, and support for the clients' business retail dynamics achieving very positive sell-out results.

The wholesale markets for Slowear took an even more positive step forward once the Slowear retail project rolled-out getting traction. In fact, a flexible fixture/corner concept established a 'shop-in-the-shop' point of sales proposal, as a hybrid collaboration with prominent specialty stores (or department stores), in order to express (in environments that were not directly owned or managed), a Slowear identity, enhancing the exposition of the Slowear products, qualities and brands.

As America tends to self-focus towards internal events when identifying with world history, we can go back to the very unfortunate month in which Lehman Brothers collapsed (last quarter of 2008) as the moment in which Slowear stepped forward and strategically started to study (and very soon roll-out) the Slowear direct retail brand new project.

2008 and 2009 were years spent in refining the new Slowear concept, revised and set to work in a highly competitive retail market, thanks to a flexible and rather unique model.

#### **4. The Slowear Retail Focus**

The question was: is a company always focusing on many different brands, capable of developing its own retail project that will inevitably need 'only one store/shop name'?

Let us not forget also, that Slowear has self-financed every capex sensitive strategy into action in those years of financial turmoil. Timing was crucial and

nevertheless tense when a flawless retail strategy fell into action. Retail is an extremely engaging financial business, even more so for a company that has to 'learn' its retail operations, while still being predominant in wholesales.

These were the years in which we were seeing lower price point fast-fashion giants (Fast Retail, Inditex, Hennes&Mauritz) conquering market shares as alternatives to the much more celebrated luxury brands. Outlets and 'off-price' stores were becoming the driving revenue strength (especially for margins) for every mega-brand strategic investment in saturated markets, celebrated designers were establishing capsule collaborations with the very same fast-fashion mass retailers targeting low price points disposable items.

The luxury retailers (global mega-brands) were investing even more in gigantic retail spaces, spending fortunes in reaching out directly to final consumers via e-commerce, while also expressing the brands via prime expensive locations, shaped on extremely repetitive identification of their look/concept.

The world prime locations for the 'brick&mortar' channel were becoming more and more crowded and, driven by demand, more and more expensive.

Modern retail format became very simply recognisable: top locations and super precise monotone brand image/concept were the crucial variables after which every retail company was making efforts. People (as human resources) for the mega-brands were not a focus at all: in other words, the retail world was becoming less human and much more standardised (boring?).

Once more, Slowear though 'out of the box': focused on the team of sales associates working in the store, the Slowear retail concept was highly adjustable to the location, was different in the respect of each building in which the retail would have been created. The mix of merchandise was extremely flexible because it could vary following the needs of the specific market and it could quickly adapt and change based on the learning sell out, region by region.

Slowear created a concept store but it was more of an expression of 'integrated concepts' than a replicable matrix: in fact, every Slowear direct store is different in the look, fixture, similar in the style and at the very top of the 'personal touch'. However, the dimensions are manageable; the ultimate feel is the same welcoming idea of a space where the client feels relaxed, at home, surrounded by ease while browsing between sophisticated products. Think about it as an association of like-minded efforts, in which many brands are sprinkled together, in comforting but somehow unexpected combinations, customised in a store-by-store story.

Slowear goal was achieved: the client was feeling in a unique relaxed and unhurried space, followed with educated attention by personable sales associates, in a space that will remind you a very pleasurable apartment where books are readable, vinyl LP's are playable and perfect espresso coffee, Prosecco (or lovely patisserie) is offered all along the day.

The diversity of Slowear, opposite to the monotone proposal of every 'corporation branded store', worked as a rupture strength; Slowear was capable of attracting like-minded fans by making them feeling spontaneous, as part of a life philosophy, part of a shared way of being, not just 'clients', not a browsing potential budget, or worst, a profit target.

Having many brands and many products is a great competitive advantage when a company desires to express (per every store) a unique diverse proposal. All of a



sudden, leveraging on many mix of products, visual merchandising and store layouts, locations and looks became coherent with the social culture of times being. The end of the years '10 meant a world willing to go back to personality exposure, enhancing differentials, rejecting globalisation, hating 'standardise', disliking soulless machine made looking replicable concepts. Slowear was the first on the line when intercepted the sense of desire for a genuine, organic, one-to-one conversation about what we like in the modern world, expressed via apparel, accessories, music (the Slowear radio – the vinyl sold in stores), perfumes and books.

Every store was born thanks to a unique situation, Milan in the Brera district, famous for art and cosy restaurants, Paris in the very centre, then Rome, London and Tokyo: rapidly the Slowear distribution via direct retail became noticed as well as profitable. The store team idea was a consistent group of well-prepared professionals, very excited about the Slowear culture mixed with their own direct personality. The sale associates called 'ambassadors' have a fluid contact also with the Headquarter, they are included in the feedback and evolution of the collections, about successes or key points to work on, and they feel they are the crucial part of the Slowear expression. The idea of sharing with the sale ambassadors the buying directions 'store by store' was set together with the store director involved at Slowear Head-Quarter level twice a year as a comprehensive unconventional HR point of view: everyone in retail knows how beneficial can be setting an extremely low rotation of personnel. The consistency on the price point of all the categories sold in Slowear stores together with the enriched proposal of mix of merchandise allowed Slowear to rapidly expand also franchising opportunities in major cities. Collaborations started with brands producing (for Slowear only) small run of those products that Slowear would never produce, like jewellery, shoes, sunglasses, precious head phones or barber products, all rare and capable of attracting (in a very natural way) the attention of a vast variety of customers seeing assortment frequently updated.

Moreover, the Slowear stores covered various areas of the urban market, from 'up and coming' areas in world capitals, to top luxury retail areas, to old town centre classic locations reaching now just more than 25 stores at the beginning of 2016, all of which are spread with balance on 3 continents (Europe, Asia, and America).

## **5. Conclusion**

It's very unusual (we might say probably 'unseen') that a company totally focused on wholesale and production, radically changes its business strategy after half a century, to then reveal a dramatic focus on retail with rapid profitable expansion. Moreover, the change is put in place by self-financing the step by step capital intense moves and it is put in place by strengthening a unique identifiable culture that anchor every professional employee, manager and director in Slowear, as well as every communication and every expression of the company towards a commune DNA. Let us also not forget that the Slowear mix of collections and products represented in the Slowear stores are 'men' only (few uni-sex accessories are offered). Breaking into a 'men retail' world can be a draining experience, men are

less keen on shopping, less keen on changing towards what they do not know and more keen on staying with what they have been buying already.

Slowear kept historical clients coming from tenth of years of wholesale distribution but Slowear also conquered new direct retail clients while becoming recognised shop by shop. Slowear found the perfect syntony with the modern era, our era in which consumers are now focused on emotional experiences, supported by real unique engaging environments and memories, generated by newness based on a history and experience. I tend to sum up in few words the strategy of Slowear by saying that a rare mix of history and innovation are here to last, meanwhile Slowear is capable of speaking our contemporary language.

## Bibliography

- Achabou, M. A., & Dekhili, S. (2013). Luxury and sustainable development: Is there a match?. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(10), 1896-1903.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.02.011>
- Arrigo, E. (2010). Innovation and Market-Driven Management in Fast Fashion Companies, *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 2, 67-85.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2010.2.06arrigo>
- Birtwistle, G., & Moore, C. M. (2007). Fashion clothing-where does it all end up?. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 35(3), 210-216.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09590550710735068>
- Brondoni, S.M. (2014). Global Capitalism and Sustainable Growth. From Global Products to Network Globalisation, *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 1, 10 – 31.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2014.1.02brondoni>
- Brondoni, S.M. (2015). Global Networks, Outside-In Capabilities and Smart Innovation, *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 1, 6-21.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2015.1.02brondoni>
- Ertekin, Z. O., & Atik, D. (2015). Sustainable Markets Motivating Factors, Barriers, and Remedies for Mobilization of Slow Fashion. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 35(1), 53-69.
- Fletcher, K. (2010). Slow fashion: An invitation for systems change. *Fashion Practice*, 2(2), 259-265.
- Gnecchi, F. (2009). Market-Driven Management, Market Space and Value Proposition. *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management*, 2, 33-45.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2009.2.04gnecchi>
- McNeill, L., & Moore, R. (2015). Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(3), 212-222.
- Mosca, F., Tamborrini, P., & Casalegno, C. (2015). Systemic Design: How to Compete by Leveraging the Value System. *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 2, 42-56.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2015.2.04mosca.tamborrini.casalegno>
- Pookulangara, S., & Shephard, A. (2013). Slow fashion movement: Understanding consumer perceptions—An exploratory study. *Journal of retailing and consumer services*, 20(2), 200-206.
- Riboldazzi, S. (2005). Global Retailers and Competitive Customer Value, *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 2, 77-87.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2005.2.07riboldazzi>

Risso, M. (2012). Exploring Partnerships for Social Innovation, *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 2, 26-36.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2012.2.03risso>

Rosenbloom, B. (2010). Six Classic Distribution Paradigms for Global Marketing Channel Strategy, *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 1, 7-17.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2010.1.02rosenbloom>

Shaw, D., Hogg, G., Wilson, E., Shiu, E., & Hassan, L. (2006). Fashion victim: the impact of fair trade concerns on clothing choice. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 14(4), 427-440.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09652540600956426>

Watson, Z. M., & Yan, R. N. (2013). An exploratory study of the decision processes of fast versus slow fashion consumers. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, 17(2), 141-159.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-02-2011-0045>

Vurro, C., Russo, A., Costanzo, L.A. (2014). Sustainability along the value chain: collaborative approaches and their impact on firm performance. *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 2, 30-44.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2014.2.04vurro.russo.costanzo>

Zucchella, A. (2007). Network Social Responsibility. *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management (symphonya.unimib.it)*, 2, 64-71.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4468/2007.2.07zucchella>