

## The Merchandiser... Wizard of the New Millennium

**R**ight after January market week, I received an urgent call from a recruiting client. "I need a line builder. We just took on a new license. I need someone ready to go to the Far East in three weeks, and be ready to show the line at March market."

As more companies add new divisions, acquire new brands via licensing, expand into new product categories, leap into other trade channels, and develop ranges of customized private-label products for their major accounts, the demand for competent, value-adding merchandisers will quickly outpace the supply.

And as stores automate the ordering process, buyers will have less time for vendor sales reps while making more time for investment with their most innovative, product-driven resources, as well as manufacturers that have advanced assortment planning and replenishment systems.

A recent survey, conducted by Execu-team Resources and *Accessories* magazine, among buyers in all trade classes reflected that only 45 percent felt that their vendors "were providing product innovation"; even worse, only 35 percent "felt that their vendors properly understood the store's customers."

What are the reasons for these low ratings on merchandising performance, and what can be done about it? Accessories industry veterans agree that there are certain fundamental skills required of a merchandiser: knowledge of the competition, an eye for trends and items, ability to direct designers, knowledge of sourcing and costing, and the ability to achieve cost and timing targets. We project that on top of these basics a merchandiser needs the following skills:

- A merchandiser must understand the brand's target consumer, and that can only come through constant observation and listening. One of the jewelry industry's most successful executives makes a point of frequently going to malls in the Midwest and South and sitting on a bench for three hours, keeping a tally of the earring styles worn by each woman who passes by. A principal of a major handbag firm makes a habit of personally conducting consumer focus groups in his office at least once a month to find out what people think of his company's existing products and to brainstorm new product ideas. And he listens!
- A merchandiser needs to know the strengths of the company and its unique niche with the retailer, and he or she fine-tunes product with a "point of differentiation" for the consumer. The best merchandisers will be "marketers" who are tuned in to their brand's persona. They will be able to link this persona to the target consumer's needs and develop products that reflect the trends most relevant to the customer. Merchandisers developing private-label products must gain an intimate knowledge of the store's customer. Private labels have become major brands, and the sharpest merchandisers are most often found walking the aisles of their customers' stores.
- A merchandiser must be a wizard who can "make things happen." With trends starting anywhere, and with production sources far away, a merchandiser needs to act quickly by channeling the creativity of designers and dealing assertively with the timing, quality, and cost factors that are controlled by foreign supply sources.
- Merchandisers must take greater risks, and need to challenge their firm's top management and staff to seek newness and innovation. The president of a highly successful start-up handbag firm told his merchandising staff, "Trust your gut; don't worry about making a mistake." This executive has created a culture in which creativity is thriving. Within only one year, the firm had been added to the matrix of every major department store group. ■

*Andrew Philip is president of Execu-team Resources, an executive search firm in New York that specializes in recruitment for the accessories industry. For more information, call 212-292-4320.*

