

Tory Burch
Sarah Szczepanski
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Summary by Morgan Lavoy

At this week's seminar, we were joined by Sarah Szczepanski, a 2009 University of Rhode Island Graduate. Sarah walked us through her career path and explained the issues she has witnessed throughout the supply chain as the Manager of Product Development at Tory Burch and as a business owner. She also explained ways these issues were resolved and where the industry can keep improving.

Sarah began her career in the fashion industry with a summer internship at Coach on the fabric development team. Proving to be an asset to the company, she was able to get a job with Coach after graduation as a freelance contractor with the same fabric development team. She stayed at Coach for seven years, and in that time, she was able to gain hands-on experience working with multiple product development teams. Additionally, within that timeframe, she witnessed a major shift in production from Italy to offshore manufacturing.

Next, Sarah worked for the company M.M. LaFleur as a designer/product developer for handbags, shoes, and accessories. Here she was very involved in all aspects of the product lifecycle. This included going to Italy to look at factories as well as choosing packaging and attending fit tests. She then started her own company, ARTXTILES, that specializes in one-of-a-kind monotype prints for the home. Sarah began her journey at Tory Burch in a contracting position as a product engineer before working her way up to her current position.

Like most companies, Tory Burch had to learn how to navigate the pandemic. One major setback for Tory Burch has been extended lead times from 40 days to 80 days. Part of this delay happens once the product reaches the U.S. because it can take approximately three weeks to unload the products. Furthermore, covid outbreaks in factories have forced their manufacturers to outsource to other factories, creating quality control issues. Tory Burch has combatted these delays by sending main line products to their outlet stores to sell if they arrive outside of the product's selling window. Across the board, customer dissatisfaction about order status visibility has increased by 74% since before the pandemic. ARTXTILES has also seen lead times of up to six months for rugs and fabrics, which has impacted their product launch timelines.

So, "where do we go from here"? Sarah answered this question with solutions such as using product lifecycle management software (PLM) and 3D sampling from design specs which can show the texture, finishings, and hardware of products. She also suggested virtual showrooms, something that a few companies have been implementing during the pandemic, as well as customer relationship management (CRM) to help maintain good relationships with customers. CRM is especially important to help communicate with customers about current order delays and lack of customer order status visibility.