

Going global

CHINESE EXHIBITORS AT THE RECENT HONG KONG FASHION WEEK WERE SO KEEN ON SECURING NEW CLIENTS, MANY WERE OPENLY ADVERTISING THEY HAD **NO MINIMUMS**, TCFWA MANAGER CAROL HANLON SAYS. SHE TELLS **RAGTRADER** ABOUT GLOBAL TRENDS IN SOURCING AND BUYING FOR NEW AND EMERGING DESIGNERS.

WHILE THERE 'IS no doubt the global economic downturn has hurt the traditional TCF manufacturing giants like China and Hong Kong, there is also no doubt that they are rising to the challenge.

In the recent past, many small clothing labels had a great deal of difficulty in finding offshore manufacturers prepared to do small runs in reasonable time – or small runs at all, for that matter. Now, however, even China has to present itself as more nimble, more flexible and more creative when it comes to servicing existing clients and finding new ones.

Carol Hanlon, head of the TCF Australia small business network, has recently returned from several overseas buying missions and noticed some definite trends. At Hong Kong Fashion Week in early July, Hanlon says she spotted numerous Chinese manufacturers exhibiting signs announcing "no minimums", and it was obvious that people were very keen on meeting new contacts and clients.

In India, where she took a delegation to the India International Garment Fair (IIGF) in New Delhi later in July, Australia was a prime target for government support, particularly with the Commonwealth Games being hosted in India next year.

"The Indian Government targeted 23 countries to invite buyers to the [fair], with Australia being a key target," Hanlon says. She took 10 labels with her to India, including Alison Cotton's Joveeba, Sylma Cabrera's Pure Soul, Battaglia, Colourspirit and Quotau. Like many other governments eager to assist their local industries by encouraging international trade, first-time buyers were provided with free air fare and accommodation support.

In Hong Kong, where the Hong Kong Trade Development Council offers free accommodation to all first-time buyers, Hanlon accompanied 15 small and emerging Australian companies, including Assodani International, Morgan Marks, Henryetta and Carmels Designs. There, she noticed a definite trend. "Obviously it goes without saying that the downturn in the US, UK and European markets has had a huge impact on all manufacturing ex China," she says. "But ragtraders are adaptable and can restructure, and I believe there

will be an increase in fast fashion – working closer to the season in regards to stock levels required."

There are still major problems facing small labels trying to source materials and manufacture offshore, including minimum order quantities, logistics and reliability of supply, as well as quality and timeliness. "It is also the continual sourcing of the right supplier to suit your needs, which can change from season to season depending on your ranges and direction," she says.

In terms of fashion trends, the most obvious was the continual move towards eco-friendly and organic fabrics. "Fashion trends still lean towards oriental, traditional finishes and themes," she says. "Throughout the world, people wish to connect with the real source of manufacture and fair trade."

This is a theme Hanlon herself has been working on for many years. As well as establishing TCFWA a decade ago and more recently TCF Australia, Hanlon has been working hard on TCF Global, which she defines as a non-profit community-based project, designed to provide an online platform to assist new and emerging Australian designers to link with global TCF industry organisations. She has set up networks in Sri Lanka, Bali, Hong Kong, India and Papua New Guinea, but perhaps the most impressive is TCF Ormoc in the Philippines. There, she has assisted 21 community sewing centres by donating sewing machines, textiles and equipment, allowing 130 men and women to set up their own small sewing businesses.

The network is also assisting a fibre project in PNG, a wool hand-weaving village project in Sri Lanka and the Seeds of Hope women's sewing project in Afghanistan. It has also helped to buy sewing machines for women in Peru and is looking into projects in Mauritius and Tanzania.

A local Perth firm is importing hand-woven plaid check fabrics and kilts from Sri Lanka for the school uniform market, and the supplier can also organise hand-woven wools in small runs for Australian designers. TCF Global also works with a wide network of small businesses in Bali, many of which are run by Australian ex-pats, to set up village support projects aimed at young people.

While these are noble projects, they are not yet commercial enterprises, Hanlon says. "Village projects are about micro-enterprise empowerment at a local level, and they need to grow and develop with local ownership at their speed. These projects are not to be confused with commercial manufacturing facilities. These areas lack resources and training, and that is what the projects I assist are trying to create or build on.

"Then we will try and assist the projects to develop towards commercial manufacture as time goes on."

Joveeba designer Alison Cotton went to India to help promote her label.

