When one thinks of made-to-measure clothing, thoughts usually run to mens tailored suits and shirts from retail clothiers specializing in that market, or custom clothing made by the local seamstress. Most of these garments evolved from custom measurements translated into hand made patterns and hand cut fabrics, for which the customer paid a handsome price in both cost and time for delivery.

As we evolve from an era of mass production to one of mass customization, and as customer demands change from being a slave of fashion to wanting products and styles that reflect their own unique personality, there are a growing number of tools becoming available to both facilitate and automate the made-to-measure market.

This rapidly growing product category, facilitated through the use of other technologies such as internet marketing and CAD software, has created some interesting challenges for both the software developers and their customers who use it. The companies looking to evolve into this new business paradigm will most likely come from either the manufacturing or retail side of the business. However, due to the nature of the business, it forces retailers to become manufacturers and manufacturers to become retailers, as each looks to compensate for shrinking margins and service the demands of changing and more sophisticated customer expectations.

Where and how can made-to-measure be used? Besides the obvious tailored suits and shirts, a growing number of vendors are using this technology for custom pants, jeans, swimwear, wet suits, uniforms, costumes, home furnishings and even footwear. At www.ic3d.com, a made-to-measure jeans supplier based in Hastings, NY, customers are given detailed directions for taking 11 body measurements, which are used in addition to the customer’s choice of color, fabric, fit, leg style button/rivet color, fly, leather label and finish for the delivery of a custom made pair of jeans within 3-4 weeks. This not to be confused with the Levi’s Personal Pair program, which is not made-to-measure, but rather an intelligence database that finds the Levi’s style (501, 505 etc.) that best fits your body type before cutting the inseam to measurement. This would fall more under the category of mass customization, as opposed to made-to-measure.

The growing number of made-to-measure (MTM) software solutions being offered are designed on the manufacturing side to maximize production, minimize costs, improve quality, meet tight manufacturing deadlines and gain a competitive edge. With solutions being offered from Lectra Systems, Gerber Garment Technology, Assyst, Wild Ginger and Investronica, even early adopters of this new business paradigm will have a wide range of options when shopping for software. The obvious question becomes “What are you shopping for?”

At it’s fundamental core, MTM software is designed to provide quick and easy data entry of customer details, body measurements and orders, and integrate that information with patternmaking software, plotters, cutters, production, shipping and accounting processes. Much like the patternmaking software that each of these vendors provides, each has its own unique feel and interface, with features that are by and large fairly similar. Having learned the pitfalls of proprietary software, all vendors claim their software and information to be supported by the vast majority of plotters and cutters used in the industry.

As in shopping for any type of software, the challenge is in knowing the correct questions to ask. We’ve provided you with a starting point below (see checklist below). According to Marla Dill, president and owner of M.A. Dill and Associates in Bear, DE, who spent 5 years with Lectra as an MTM specialist, you should shop for MTM software with “clearly defined scenarios to follow from A to Z. The presentation should demonstrate how to automate the processes you are currently doing by hand. Be sure you see every step of the process on the computer screen, and see the finished output.” She advises the shopper to “see as opposed to listen.” She also recommends checking with customers who have already purchased the system.

The nature of the made-to-measure business model creates an opportunity that is rather unique for the manufacturer,
that of direct contact with the customer. This can provide some interesting challenges to a company whose databases, marketing plans, inventories and accounting systems are all geared towards production and marketing in mass quantity. How do you track and manage the retail side of the made-to-measure business?

ImageWare Technologies, Inc., an Atlanta, GA based software vendor, specializes in the other side of the equation, the point-of-sale retail transactions. Their specialization lies in the area of Relationship Selling, which uses technology to identify and track specific customer needs. The features of their ImageMate and ImageWorks Enterprise systems include customer profiling and relationship selling that integrates with POS, order entry, garment tracking and garment design EDI, all of which is designed to work with an internet based transaction, network and remote ordering capabilities. Their maxim of “Customer-Concentric Production and Customer-Concentric Marketing” promotes the ability to reach highly targeted markets through their systems that will, for example, list for you the names of all New York attorneys whose average suit purchases are over $2,000, who have not bought a blue stripe suit from you in the last two years. Granted, this type of micro-marketing will take time for a company to develop, but it certainly answers the challenge of meeting the demands of busy, time-starved and dissatisfied customers who are demonstrating an increasing desire for their own look, their own feel and their own fit.

While many factors play a part in the future growth of the made-to-measure business, a key aspect to this emerging marketplace is the role the internet will play. According to the results from the 1997 CyberShopper Survey conducted by the Cobb Group*, the sales of apparel via the internet were sixth in volume behind software, books, computer hardware, travel and CDs/videos. Netscape, publishers of the popular WWW browser, predict dynamic, more interactive HTML and customization/individualization are the top two future trends** that will drive e-commerce to a $220 Billion dollar business by the year 2002. With 1997 retail sales lower than projected, and online retailers reporting record-breaking sales, it is clear to see where the future lies.

If you’re currently in the custom or made-to-measure business, there is no question that the MTM production and marketing software being sold to the industry could be a tremendous asset in growing your business. However, the real winners in the new era of mass customization and marketing to a customer of one, are going to be the companies who don’t just automate their existing business processes, but incorporate MTM along with any combination of technology tools such as CAD, CAM, digital short-run printing and the internet, to not only develop entirely new products, but allow the customer to shop for them from the luxury of their home or office. The statics are already confirming that the customer is willing to pay more for something that is unique and customized to their needs and fit. While many will try to argue that custom manufacturing in a factory setting causes the price of the product to be too expensive, there is another side of the equation that’s worth noting. If you leverage the use of technology to develop unique products that the customer wants, has never seen before and can’t get from anyone else in the world, then what price do they have to compare it to?

Made-to Measure Software Checklist

1. Does the system interface to other software and hardware such as mainframes, body scanners, plotters and scanners?
2. Is the system internet/web browser compatible for order entry and transfer of information?
3. Which processes are integrated, and which are stand-alone?

*www.techexchange.com
4. Can you fully customize the system?

5. Can alteration amounts be determined from body measurements?

6. Can alterations amounts be determined from body measurements and incremental amounts?

7. Can blue pencil alterations be automated?

8. Can you track orders by customer names, fabric codes or other critical data?

9. Can you store knowledge based rules?

10. Can style options in the order automatically trigger pattern substitution in the marker?

11. Can modifications be triggered automatically by conditions in the order such as style, body measurements or sizes?

12. Can you enter an order without specifying a size, letting the system select the size automatically?

13. Can orders be imported electronically and processed through to cut data automatically?

14. How long does it take to process an order through to either cut data or plot data?

15. Can the system validate customers' body measurements.

16. Does the system validate order data before submitting it for processing on the CAD system?

17. Does the system provide a detailed activity log of order information?
18. What is the training time? Is the training on-site or at a school or vendor?

19. What is the cost? Does it include training? What type of technical support is included?

20. Is there a service contract, what does it cost, and what does it include?

Teri Ross is a writer, speaker and consultant on new technology for the sewn products industries. She is owner and President of Imagine That!