

BIDC FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Plus Size Apparel

**Compiled by
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**For
BARBADOS INVESTMENT AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

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Background

In 2011 Barbados was ranked at number 12 among the top 20 fattest nations of the world. In Barbados, 74% of women and 55% of men were overweight. About 36% of women were considered obese.

With waistlines continuing to expand, the plus-size market is certainly one of the fastest-growing sectors of the women's ready-to-wear industry, experts say. Yet, its potential seems to be continuously eluding manufacturers and stymieing retailers. This is a market waiting impatiently to be listened to and to be catered to.

Objectives

The focus group sought to provide apparel designers and manufacturers with information about this niche market across four key apparel categories - tops, bottoms, bras and panties, with respect to body shape, sizing and fit problems, and clothing needs and wants. An understanding of size and body shape will help in the identification of market voids and will provide apparel manufacturers and designers the guidance to make garments to match the bodies and clothing preferences of these consumers.

In addition to identifying market potential for local producers, the research describes sizing and fit problems, and offers insights on guidelines for sizing for overweight and obese females, reflecting body shape, social psychological needs, and shopping behaviors.

Research Questions

1. Are local manufacturers catering to the plus size market's needs?
2. Where is the market potential for developing apparel products for this niche market... business attire, under garments, casual clothing etc?
3. What new products and sizing categories should be developed?

Participants

The focus group consisted of 7 participants who were all women between the ages of 25 and 55. The participants also varied from petite (height) to tall, and had a wide variety of body types and shapes.

General Overview

The main sentiment expressed throughout each discussion was that “**Plus size is not all the same.**” so manufacturers need to do more first hand research, and stop generalizing plus sized women.

In addition, all participants complained of being discriminated against, in school, at work, and in everyday social settings. It was concluded that plus-sized women are often regarded as less important, and that the problems they experience while shopping for clothing stem from these negative views.

Research Findings

General Findings

Are local manufacturers and retailers catering to the plus size market's needs?

Local seamstresses are the persons of choice for plus-sized women in Barbados. This is because seamstresses are better at providing clothes, which cater to the exact body shape and size of the participants, allowing them to feel 100% happy with, and comfortable in their clothing.

Local garment retailers, on the other hand, have received very negative reviews from the plus size market. Participants complained of not being able to find garments in their size, items being extremely overpriced, and service and attitude towards plus sized women leaving much to be desired.

Some local manufacturers who provide T-shirts and polo shirts for example, have attempted to cater to the plus size market, but participants still complain about poor fit.

Where is the market potential for developing apparel products for this niche market... business attire, under garments, casual clothing etc?

The participants all agreed that they are unhappy with the current local offerings for the following items:

- Casual Attire
- Business Attire
- Formal Wear
- Undergarments
- Swimwear

For various reasons, as explained in the section of this document, entitled “Specific Problems Encountered in the Plus Size Market”, the participants all felt that local manufacturers and retailers needed to do a better job at providing the above items for the plus size market. Thus, there is definitely potential for developing apparel for this niche, since the customers in this market have turned to shopping overseas to find better options. The participants all welcomed the idea of being able to find better variety at more reasonable prices, locally.

What new products and sizing categories should be developed?

The participants all called for improvements to be made to existing products, and for local manufacturers to do more first-hand research to determine the actual varieties in body shapes of plus sized women, rather than relying on stereotypes such as “pear”, “apple”, and “hourglass”, for example.

Specific Problems Encountered in the Plus Size Market

Underwear

When asked, “How do you feel about the undergarment options that are available to you in Barbados?” no one responded “Very Happy”. The participants were mostly disappointed and some even responded “Hopeless”.

The major complaints were as follows:

- The straps and under wires cut into the skin and leave marks.
- Underwear for plus sized women is extremely expensive, and there aren’t many options in Barbados; thus, the entire group reported that they are forced to shop at Cave Shepherd or overseas (especially Martindale’s) for underwear. The group agreed that a decent price for bras is BBD \$50.00-\$60.00.

- Also, for local underwear, the participants had an issue with lack of colours (especially nude garments for black people), poor fabric quality, and poor fit. They also said that the quality of underwear in Europe is better, as it lasts 5-6 years.
- One participant noted, “They need to remember plus sized women have back fat, so that needs to be in the cup to avoid side boobs.”
- “When wearing shape wear, going to the bathroom is hell on wheels.”
- Another said, “Sales people [in Barbados] are not trained to cater to plus sized women. They don’t know bra sizes or sales etiquette, and they try to hustle you into buying something that you know won’t fit. Only mature salespersons, and the one in specialty stores are actually helpful.”

Swimwear

When it comes to purchasing swimwear in Barbados, the participants have always found it challenging. The main challenge is finding swimwear to fit properly. The participants agree that manufacturers do not pay enough attention to torso measurements on plus sized women. Another popular challenge is finding swimwear that is as attractive as the pieces made for smaller women.

Below are some of the complaints from the participants.

- “It doesn’t fit well. Manufacturers think they can just upsize the small swimwear and it will fit us.”
- “I can only go to upbeat, because I’m short and I always have to buy a smaller top than bottom.”
- “I have to get the seamstress to put on more material for me.”
- Design options are limited, and very unattractive. “They don’t make plus size swim wear in nice designs like the small swim wear. They make them in really ugly prints and colours.”

Pants

Finding pants is consistently a problem for plus-sized women in Barbados, as explained in the comments below.

- “They don’t make petite clothes or bring them in.”
- “The waist fits perfect but the crotch is ridiculous.”

- “Pants are always too long, and you have to wear really high heels to compensate. Bajans are not tall people.”
- “Old Navy plus sized jeans always fit good.”

Clothing Options

The participants were mostly dissatisfied with the local retail options for: Casual Attire, Business Attire, and Formal Wear. This is due to limited options in terms of materials, styles and colours. One person said they would love to get more clothes in Sea Island Cotton. The entire group reported that they are tired settling for things that they are “OK” with, as opposed to being exceptionally happy about their clothes. They also said when attending events, they don’t get to feel special in their clothing, like smaller people do.

In addition, the participants felt as though retailers were exploiting them, since there are only a handful of suppliers of plus sized apparel in Barbados. For this reason, they said, “They’re so few [retailers] here that they poke out your eye with the price.” Another comment was that “It’s always a challenge to find professional attire, and the prices of suits are extremely ridiculous.”

Apart from custom-made clothing, the participants felt limited to shopping at “In Style Plus” in Sky Mall, and sometimes Sheraton Mall. However, they reported that “they often don’t have a 2XL or 3XL, which is what is needed.” For this reason, persons turn to shopping online or while travelling overseas, and everyone praised the Ashley Stuart brand for great styles and sizes.

Poor Fit

Poor fit was repeatedly brought up during the focus group session, and is the biggest challenge that was reported by the participants. The main sentiment was that “plus size is not all the same” and that manufacturers need to do more observation and first-hand research, in order to develop better ways to size clothing for plus sized women.

When asked, “Was it easy for you to define your shape based on the chart [below]?” everyone said “No”.

3. Using the illustration below, which figure best describes your body shape?



Figure 1. Shape Chart for Plus Sized Women.

Below are some of the sentiments that were expressed by the participants, regarding poor fit.

- “When buying jackets and long sleeved shirts, the arms are always too tight.” Everyone reported that they have to get clothes custom-made.
- “They are not paying enough attention to torso measurements on plus sized women.” One participant, however, praised Old Navy Jeans for their plus size jeans.
- Retailers don’t import enough of the big sizes, and this causes a challenge.
- “They need to remember plus sized women have back fat, so this needs to be in the cup to avoid side boobs.”
- To echo a point made in the Swimwear section, “Manufacturers think they can just upsize the small swimwear and it will fit us.”

How societal discrimination against plus-sized women negatively affects existing apparel options for this market locally.

From the discussion it is clear that the majority of shopping woes experienced by plus sized women in Barbados stem from negative attitudes toward plus-sized women. The focus group participants strongly felt that “we need to change the mindsets of the people” in order to achieve equality and a better shopping experience for everyone.

Also, labels such as: “fluffy”, “thickie sweets”, “fat”, and “fat and ugly”, are a big problem for this group. The group said that people in society are very inconsiderate towards them, and that people need to rethink what they define as “beauty”. These attitudes result in the belief that plus sized persons are less beautiful and less desirable, and less worthy of having nice things. People in society seem to think that all plus sized persons are unhealthy, want to be fat, and don’t care about themselves, with comments such as, “Y’all would not have any problem if you would lose weight.”

Below are some of the other views that were shared by the group.

- “People are discriminatory and as soon as you walk in the store, they say, “we don’t sell plus size here”, or “we don’t have clothes to fit you”.
- Bullying directed towards persons who are plus sized is a serious thing in our society, and “self-hate is the major underlying root of these problems.”
- People need to stop with the comments like “You pretty for a big girl.”

These unwelcoming attitudes toward plus sized persons are the leading cause for why plus sized women have so many challenges finding clothing. People in society see plus sized persons as “less than”, and don’t think it’s necessary or a priority to cater to them in the clothing industry.

General Consensus

In summary, the focus group revealed that plus sized women in Barbados have multiple challenges finding apparel to suit their sizes, body shapes, and tastes. Persons in this market are unhappy with the lack of variety in colours, fabrics, and styles for plus sized casual wear, business attire, formal wear, undergarments, and swimwear.

The participants all agreed that more attention needs to be paid to the plus size market, and developing a sizing system that works. They also felt that more needs to be done to stop discrimination against plus sized persons, and this will result in better customer service and a better shopping experience for plus sized persons.

Everyone also agreed that they would like to take part in bra-fitting training events to help them learn to better choose a bra that fits.

Recommendations

Recommendations for solving the problems that were reported are as follows:

1. Conduct more market research which will educate retailers on the specific needs and wants of the plus size market, given that there is a lot of potential in this market.
2. Disseminate a condensed (and easily consumed) version of the report to local retailers and manufacturers so they can understand the problems in this market as well as the possible solutions.
3. Use seminars and workshops to encourage local manufacturers and retailers to focus more on the plus size market and to recognize the emotional challenges faced by plus sized women especially while shopping for apparel.
4. Create more awareness of the discrimination problems in society, via panel discussions and social media campaigns.
5. Conduct a mass measurement program, which will provide local manufacturers with precise data to allow them to better size plus size clothing. This program can also result in a unique shape chart that better reflects the body shapes of plus sized women in Barbados.