

From pilot to bottom line.

How enterprise fashion teams turn AI into business value, and what separates the ones that get there in six months.

EVIDENCE

Implementation results from enterprise deployments, and research with users in daily production use, July 2026

WRITTEN FOR

Senior leaders in design, product, marketing, e-commerce and general management

READING TIME

The brief, 60 seconds. Full paper, 10 minutes.

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How to move from pilot to bottom-line results in six months.

Fashion has stopped debating whether AI is good enough. Among teams using it daily inside live collections, that question is settled. What follows is what the results look like, and what separates the brands that get them from the ones that stall.

FINDING 01

Value arrives in days. Cost falls over quarters.

Half of the users we surveyed had a valid result on their first day, and almost all within their first week. The cost gains take longer and go much further: one apparel group reached roughly a tenth of its previous studio production cost within six months of starting.

FINDING 02

The biggest reported benefit is agreement, not output.

Better cross-team alignment on visuals was selected more often than image quality, output volume or cost. It is also where the time goes: one large fashion group shortened its design phase by around a third by reaching faster agreement through photoreal looks.

FINDING 03

Most pilots stall for reasons that are not technical.

Results are experienced, but the full value is not extracted. Two causes repeat. Culture, where the word efficiency is heard as cost cutting. And data, where product information is incomplete or scattered across systems that do not talk to each other.

WHAT IT TAKES

Direction from the top, one use case, one written baseline.

Leadership states what the freed capacity is for, in growth terms, before anyone is asked to change how they work. Then a single use case owned by one person inside the team, with the current cost written down before you begin, and a sponsor on both the design and the commercial side. First results land in month one. Automation by month six. Integration with PLM and DAM inside the year.

WHERE MOST ARE

Almost everyone is still in phase one.

Most brands we work with are running one team on one use case. Very few have reached the point where generated assets flow into the systems of record and both halves of the business pull from the same source. The distance between those two states is where the margin sits.

If you read nothing else, that is the paper. What follows is the evidence.

Most brands are still in phase one. Four minutes will tell you where yours is.

See where your organization sits →

thefabricant-insight-paper.netlify.app/audit

01 Efficiency has become the growth strategy

02 The biggest benefits

03 Three use cases where value is felt

04 What makes results stall

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Efficiency has become the growth strategy.

Growth in fashion is harder to buy than it used to be. The advantages that carried the last two decades, scale and access to low-cost sourcing, are largely spent as differentiators. Most competitors have both, and neither produces a healthy economic model on its own any more.

What remains is the internal cost of running the business. Every process that consumes budget without distinguishing the brand is money that could be spent on something that does. Efficiency in this sense is not cost reduction. It is reallocation: moving resource out of repetitive production and into the things consumers actually notice.

Two processes in fashion fit that description almost exactly. Sampling and content production are both expensive, both highly repetitive, and neither is where a brand's distinctiveness lives. Nobody chooses a coat because of the fourth fit sample, or the studio day that photographed it.

The barrier to testing this is lower than most brands assume, and it is the finding leaders tend to be most surprised by. Half of the users we surveyed reported something tangible on their first day. Almost all had a valid result inside their first week, and the large majority reach one within five generations of an idea. No migration, no integration, and no retraining before someone can try it. A designer opens a reference in the morning and has something the room can judge before lunch.

EXECUTIVE GUIDANCE

→ *If you have not started*

1 Pick the pain, not the technology

Choose one use case where the cost is visible on someone's budget today: sample dependency, render quality that never reaches commercial standard, or a content backlog that studio capacity cannot clear.

2 Start where the team is ready

Begin with a team that is curious and wants to test new methods, not the one with the tidiest business case. A group that has to be convinced first will spend the quarter being convinced. Enthusiasm cannot be assigned, so start where it already exists and let the result travel to the rest of the organization.

3 Write down the baseline before you begin

Hours per visual, samples per style, weeks from design to approval, cost per content piece. Gains are real either way. Measured gains are the ones that get funded a second time.

The biggest benefits.

Across every team we surveyed, a faster path from design to approval was reached by better visual cross-team alignment. Alignment was the single most selected answer, ahead of image quality, output volume and cost.

Most reversible delay, within a brand's control, is not production time. It is disagreement about what the garment actually is. A coloured sketch is a proposal that every stakeholder completes differently in their own head. The designer, the product manager, the buyer and the merchandiser each picture something slightly different, and the difference does not surface until the sample review weeks later. Then the loop restarts.

A photoreal image closes that gap inside the meeting rather than at the sample. Everyone is looking at the same object.

"As the pictures that it creates are very photorealistic, it is faster and more accurate to review new designs than a colored sketch."

FASHION DESIGNER

Beneath that shared benefit, the two halves of the business report different returns, and each matches the team's mandate.

DESIGN AND PRODUCT TEAMS

- 1 Faster design-to-approval
- 2 Higher volume of output
- 3 Faster production

CONTENT AND E-COMMERCE TEAMS

- 1 Higher volume of output
- 2 Faster go-to-market
- 3 Fewer samples and reshoots

Design and product teams

Design teams feel it first in how they decide.

The organizations that have gone furthest re-engineered the design process around this rather than bolting it on. They start from images and leave the sketch to the tech pack. Designers who once drew a small coloured flat and defended it now present a full styled look carrying the brand identity and their own point of view, and the review conversation begins several steps further along.

The other change is where the first result comes from. Through the 2010s brands invested heavily in 3D to check fit and cut sampling waste. It worked for what it was built for, but renders read as renders, so photography and physical samples stayed in the loop for every review and every campaign, and brands funded two pipelines for one garment. Moving an existing 3D garment into a generative workflow returns a photoreal image in seconds to minutes, against the hours a render takes to develop.

EXISTING 3D ASSET · HOURS TO DEVELOP

SAME ASSET, PHOTOREAL · SECONDS TO MINUTES



THE SAME GARMENT, BEFORE AND AFTER. SOURCE: THE FABRICANT PLATFORM

"Making garments and avatar look more realistic, creating content much faster than in 3D."

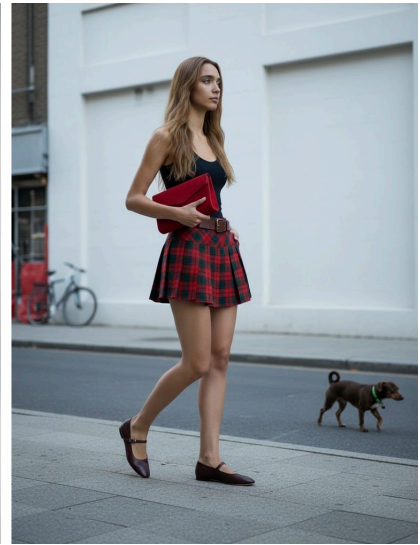
3D DESIGNER

Content and e-commerce teams

Commercial teams feel it in what they can produce.

For these teams it is not a side use, it is the anchor. Digital samples, model imagery and product video have always waited on one physical object that every downstream function had to share. The sample was never only a garment. It was a scheduling dependency, and it is the reason content, sell-in and approval ran in series rather than

alongside one another. Producing all three formats from the design alone breaks that sequence.



DIGITAL SAMPLE ON WHITE · MODEL IMAGE, STUDIO, FOR SALES · EDITORIAL, STREET, NATURAL LIGHT. THREE COMMERCIAL FORMATS PRODUCED WITHOUT A PHYSICAL SAMPLE. SOURCE: THE FABRICANT PLATFORM

"Making changes and pack shots quickly, making model pictures that sales can use to sell from."

FASHION BRAND TEAM MEMBER, COMMERCIAL ROLE

There is a commercial consequence to alignment ranking first. If the first-order benefit is agreement, a business case built on cost per image is pricing the cheapest thing in the process and ignoring the expensive one. Price the decision, not the picture.

→ *The argument*

Photoreal imagery is not an aesthetic upgrade. It is a communication protocol.

CROSS-TEAM ALIGNMENT WAS SELECTED MORE OFTEN THAN IMAGE QUALITY, OUTPUT VOLUME OR COST

Three use cases where value is felt.

Three brands, three different problems, three different measures of success.

HIGHER QUALITY AND BREADTH OF CONTENT, AT A FRACTION OF THE COST

Content demand keeps rising while studio capacity and budgets stay flat. The usual response is to shoot less or shoot cheaper, and both cost quality. Producing imagery digitally removes the ceiling: the constraint stops being the studio calendar and becomes what the brand wants to say. Quality tends to rise, because consistency is easier to hold across a generated library than across a year of shoot days.

EUROPEAN APPAREL GROUP · THREE PRODUCT CATEGORIES

The brand tested AI imagery on a single promotional sales push, with no change to anything upstream. The images went live. E-commerce photography moved onto the platform next. Once the foundation was built, shooting marketing assets separately no longer made sense. Within a year the brand was producing digital assets across all three product categories, at roughly a tenth of what studio production had cost, with more consistent output and no ceiling on volume.

BETTER PRODUCT PRESENTATION, LEADING TO STRONGER SELL-IN

Wholesale sell-in runs on a compressed window. Buyers see a collection once and decide quickly, and what they see is uneven: styles with a good sample present well, the rest get described. Exceptions and local variations are handled with a promise rather than an image. Levelling what buyers look at, and answering a request inside the meeting, changes what a showroom is for.

WHOLESALE BRAND WITHIN A FASHION GROUP

The brand rebuilt its buyer presentation on assets produced from the design rather than from samples. Every product is shown at the same quality and styled consistently, so no style is disadvantaged by the sample it happened to get. The larger change came when buyers asked for exceptions. A request for another colourway, or a variation for a local market, could be answered immediately with an image the buyer could judge and commit to. Sell-in adoption improved, along with the speed of the process and the quality of what buyers saw at the point of decision.

A DESIGN WORKFLOW REINVENTED FROM THE INSIDE

Where a technology is adopted by the people doing the work rather than mandated above them, the workflow tends to change shape rather than simply speed up. That is a different and more durable outcome than efficiency, and it is the one that compounds across seasons.

LARGE EUROPEAN FASHION GROUP · MULTIPLE DIVISIONS

Designers stopped sketching. The sequence had been a hand sketch, then a coloured version in Illustrator, then a presentation to product managers, buyers and merchandisers. Designers began skipping it, editing directly on an image and presenting a full styled look carrying both the brand identity and their own point of view. Adoption spread faster than any rollout plan, because nobody was being asked to add a step. They were being allowed to remove one. The design phase is now around a third shorter, and confidence in the decisions made inside it is higher.

Cases anonymized at client's request.

What makes results stall.

The opportunity is not in question. The execution is.

Most pilots do not become processes. Results are experienced, but the full value is not extracted. The reasons fall into two groups, and organizations usually have one of each.

Culture is eating strategy for lunch

Leadership can decide to move. It cannot decide that people feel safe. That gap is the most common place adoption stalls, and it is also the most fixable, because the fear underneath it is usually a reaction to something nobody said out loud.

When a leadership team announces efficiency, a design or content team hears one thing: cost cutting. If nobody explains what the freed-up capacity is for, people fill in the answer themselves, and they fill it in with the worst version. It shows up as slow adoption, onboarding sessions that never get booked, and licences that quietly go unused.

The organizations that get past this say the ambition out loud, and it is a growth ambition rather than a cost one. One fashion group we work with put it plainly to its teams: the point is to do considerably more with the same people, in a market where headcount will not grow and expectations will. That framing changes what the technology means. It stops being a threat to a job and becomes the reason the job gets bigger.

"Our leadership is fully behind AI. We are given access to any tools we want to try."

RESEARCH RESPONDENT

Then they make the fear impossible to justify, by starting small. One use case, one champion, on work that is visibly nobody's favourite part of the week. Recolouring the same digital sample for the tenth colourway. Nobody defends that work, and taking it out of a designer's week is experienced as a gift rather than a threat. The champion proves it on real work in front of their own colleagues, which is the only demonstration that ever convinces a team.

Data flows are not well orchestrated

Before a brand can produce at collection scale, someone has to establish what product information exists, where it sits and what condition it is in. Fragmented tooling and unclear ownership compound it: when one function runs the initiative and reports on it alone, half the return is generated somewhere nobody is measuring.

EUROPEAN WOMENSWEAR BRAND

Before this brand could produce imagery at collection scale, we mapped how product information moved between existing systems, found where records were incomplete, and agreed how the right attributes would be extracted and enriched so images could be produced reliably rather than one at a time. That work was not generative. The output of the phase was not an image. It was the ability to produce thousands of them without a person assembling the inputs by hand.

The data foundation is the unglamorous half of the work, and in our experience it is the half that decides whether a pilot ever becomes a process.

HOW TO AVOID RESULTS STALLING

→ *Executive guidance*

1 State the ambition, then make it small

Say what the freed capacity is for, in growth terms, before asking anyone to change how they work. Then narrow the first target to one use case owned by one person inside the team, on work nobody enjoys defending.

2 Look at the data before you look at the tool

If output is inconsistent or cannot be produced at volume, the cause is usually upstream: incomplete product records, attributes held in systems that do not talk to each other, or no agreement on which source is authoritative. This is a mapping exercise to set the foundation for scalable success.

3 Move ownership across the line

If one department runs it and reports on it alone, it will under-report its own results. Design feels it in approval speed and alignment. Commerce feels it in volume, samples and time to market. One report, both sets of numbers, one sponsor from each side.

What can leaders do?

Four things, and the order matters more than any of them individually.

Set the ambition and grant permission. Say what the freed capacity is for, in growth terms, before anyone is asked to change how they work. Nothing else on this list survives an unstated ambition.

Name a champion inside the team, not above it. Someone doing the job rather than managing a rollout, who proves it on something specific in front of the colleagues whose opinion carries weight.

Fund the support that builds confidence. Not a handover. Hands-on sessions on your own garments, at the point where the team is actually stuck.

Only then make it an expectation. Reversed, with a mandate arriving before a proof point, the same technology reads as something being done to people rather than for them.

Results in the first weeks are not a differentiator. They arrive whether or not anyone plans for them. The gap opens over the following year, and it opens along a predictable path.

1

MONTH ONE

Results

Every licensed user is producing usable output on their own work. Almost everyone reaches this, and most reach it in the first week.

2

MONTHS TWO TO SIX

Automation

The proven use case moves to the rest of the department. Brand libraries and templates live in a shared space. Repetitive workflows are automated. Savings start being counted rather than estimated.

3

MONTHS SIX TO TWELVE

Integration

Integration with existing systems. Assets connect to PLM and DAM, e-commerce and marketing pull from the same source as design, and the first manufacturing briefings use generated imagery rather than waiting for samples.

Keeping pace is what keeps the gains coming

New capability arrives in this category every few weeks, which means the way a team was shown to work in month one can improve further by month four. What hinders further development is not that people stop using the technology. It is that they keep using it exactly the way they were taught at the start, while the technology keeps moving.

It is a cycle: learn, produce, review the results together against a benchmark, adjust, and go again on what the last quarter exposed.

What it takes to run this

The commercial shape follows the same three phases. A short trial proves the fit with a small group and no integration work. A paid proof of concept of three to six months, with a defined user group and a shared credit pool, carries the first results and the move to automation. An annual plan carries integration into PLM and DAM. Usage reporting runs throughout, so adoption is visible in numbers every month rather than in anecdotes every quarter.

EXECUTIVE GUIDANCE

→ If it is working and you want to go further

1 Check whether the saving is banked or reinvested

Teams that bank the efficiency and stop there plateau within two quarters. The ones that compound redirect it into more variants, more markets, more content per product, and work that could never previously be justified.

2 Check where the output lives

If generated assets sit in a folder beside the real library rather than inside PLM and DAM, the parallel workflow will quietly revert to the serial one it replaced. One library, not two, is the test of whether it has become standard.

3 Check for the continuous improvement loop

A supplier who reports consumption is selling capacity. A partner reviews your output against a benchmark, tells you what to do differently, and moves your team on as the technology moves. If nobody has changed how your team works in six months, the relationship has become a licence.

Method.

In July 2026 we surveyed active users of The Fabricant across 14 companies, all working inside live collections, in design, 3D, product, graphic, operations, marketing and leadership roles. We asked how quickly they got value, what had changed since they adopted, and what they can now do that they could not do before, or could not do as fast. This is a study of users who have adopted the technology, not a measure of how many have. The client cases draw on implementation results from enterprise accounts. All quotes and cases are anonymized per user agreement.

START A CONVERSATION

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SEE THE PLATFORM

www.thefabricant.com