

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the structure and performance of the Retail industry.

My submission is a consumer and as a purchaser of products from the retail sector which is an overall satisfactory experience. I do however have problems with the way clothing is sold in Australia. In the last 20 years while population has increased:

- real choice (has in my opinion) decreased and
- retailers have become more narrowly focussed.

The examples I am most concerned about include buying shirts for my husband and sons. When we married in 1981 I could choose from 3 brands of shirtmakers who provided fractional fit business and casual shirts with varying sleeve lengths. There were 2 brands which provided shirts with different sleeve lengths at the same price as for standard sleeve lengths- Van Heusen and Glow Weave. There was also an expensive French brand which had fractional fit sleeves at the same price as standard sleeves. There was a good range of colours and styles when there were three or more brands. Glow Weave stopped producing fractional sleeve shirts some years ago and now the price of a very limited range of shirts has increased to close to the expensive French brand .

Our solution is that my husband's shirts are purchased here but from a very limited range of colours and patterns and supplemented when we travel to the USA , France, Scandinavia and Italy.

In 1981 I was buying shirts for one husband with very long arms now there are also 2 sons who also require business shirts to fit long arms. The population has grown, the number of tall men in the population has increased but the options within the market have decreased and the price has risen. I do not believe that retailers are looking to cater for the whole market but prefer to provide for an average shirt wearer of average dimensions. In this regard I do not think retailers are meeting market requirements and therefore should not be surprised when people purchase on-line or overseas.

Similarly when taking my mother or my mother-in-law shopping for winter clothes there has been a problem finding warm clothes in winter for older ladies. They are both in their 80s and do not move much so they get very cold easily. Apart from track suits there are very few warm clothes sold in winter which provide warmth for older ladies. The knitwear is thin, trousers and skirts are made from thin manmade fibres and they do not find these sufficiently warm. My mother in Melbourne has to resort to long-johns and spencers, then long sleeve tee shirts, knitwear, cardigans and then a coat and dressing has become very tiring for her. Why have retailers decided to only purchase thin clothes requiring many layers which are unsuitable for this older population?

Suitable garments are a huge challenge. My 21 year old daughter and her friends constantly have problems finding dresses which are long enough to be able to be worn in an office setting or to be able to sit down in public with comfort. She is 176 cm tall and has taller friends . Young women's fashion is very pretty but has a limited understanding the range of sizing necessary, of decent length, and of the length of a body shoulder to the waist. Her response to the poor range of options is to buy online.

In the same way shoes sizes have conformed to a strange understanding of women's feet. I have had a European size 42 foot since 1964. At that time it was unusual to be a tall woman and have feet that were large. In fact the first shoe salesman said that if Madam didn't fit the last pair of shoes he had Madam should consider wearing the boxes they came in instead! I have not been met with that degree of rudeness since then but there are a very significant number of tall women in our population who have terrible problems trying to buy a pair of shoes that fit. Some friends daughters are size 15 feet. They deserve a pretty pair of shoes as much as a dainty

size 8 does. I know more than one teenage girl and girl in her 20s who have to purchase shoes from overseas because they are simply not catered for by shoes shops in Australia. Retailers have been told these problems for years but appear not to listen or not to care. The result is that I frequently buy shoes in Europe and the USA.

In contrast to the ageing of the population retailers focus disproportionately on the fashion interests of teenagers and the very young in the ranges of clothing which are available. In the USA and Europe retailers provide significant and wide ranging collections for women older than 30. That is why we buy on line from them. Try buying an evening suit in Australia for a woman over 50. Get ready for a very lengthy and inefficient process. In Britain, the USA, Italy or France this commonly required item is not difficult to find.

I do not believe retailers listen to customers' requirements and feedback. Why for example are options for the average Australian woman in winter clothing reduced to black, black, black, grey, black and a flash of red? In Europe and the USA there is a complete palette of colours of clothing available. In any CBD in Australia it looks like the working women are on their way to a solemn funeral and remain suspended in deep mourning for the duration of the season.

Even for children the rigid devotion to putting winter clothes out in summer and summer clothes in winter is at the extreme edge of absurdity. When you purchase clothes for a growing child at the beginning of 'the fashion season' there is every chance the child will have destroyed or grown out of the clothing before the actual end of the climactic season. It is not possible to buy new pyjamas or warm tops in August and September. Nor is it possible in in March –April to buy new tee-shirts or shorts or swimmers even though the average temperature in April in Perth was over 30 degrees almost every day. Why were only winter clothes available at that time? It is extremely difficult for parents especially when children grow so much at the end of summer and in autumn. Why does it have to be this way? Retailers in clothing are not listening to customers and therefore may find customers are forced to seek other overseas options.

In conclusion I would like to ask retailers of fashion to respond to the needs of the whole Australian market, to begin listening to consumers and to move away from a model in which they seek to limit real choice to suit their most advantageous wholesale purchasing arrangements. Australian retailers need to act as a conduit between consumers and manufacturers to provide a comprehensive market range of things people want to buy.

I thank the Productivity Commission for examining this issue in a public inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Rhonda Kerr