

**Bloomberg Businessweek****Magazine**<http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-08-06/a-fashion-guy-gets-gap-back-to-basics>

# A Fashion Guy Gets Gap Back to Basics

By [Jane Porter](#) August 06, 2008

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Charged with reviving the ailing brand, Patrick Robinson is putting a modern spin on classics

In recent months, Gap (GPS) has made many of the basic moves one would expect from an apparel chain that has grown too big and lost its way. It has whacked inventory by a third, nixed TV ads to reduce marketing costs, cut from 12 to 9 months the time it takes to move clothes from concept to rack, and staked out the demographic middle, 25- to 35-year-olds.

Sales remain anemic, and Gap needs to get people excited about its clothes again even as consumers pull back and the competition heats up. The man largely responsible for making that happen is design chief Patrick Robinson. No mass merchandiser, Robinson worked for Anne Klein, Giorgio Armani, Perry Ellis, and, most recently, Paco Rabanne. Since his appointment 14 months ago, Robinson, 41, has pushed Gap to reconnect with its roots: classic American apparel with a modern twist. He is now rolling out his first large collection, the fall line, and the industry will be watching to see how it sells. Robinson can't turn Gap around by himself. But, says Mark Montagna, who covers retail for the investment bank CL King & Associates, "he can single-handedly sink it."

When Gary Muto, who oversees adult apparel for Gap, opened Robinson's portfolio, he saw what he was looking for: the ability to create a cohesive look for everything from belt buckles to blouses, a skill Gap had lost in recent years. "If you look at his work," says Muto, "there is a consistent handwriting and point of view." Beyond bringing clarity to the brand, Gap's aim is to allow shoppers to mix and match garments and come up with different looks that make them feel individual. The hope, of course, is that Jane or Joe Consumer will buy several items per visit.

Beyond that, Robinson had a pretty good idea of what ailed Gap. It was targeting too young a customer (18- to 24-year-olds), stocking poor quality clothes, and imitating Uniqlo, H&M, and Zara, which have transformed the industry with their focus on fast fashion—rapid-fire mini-trends. "It wasn't being Gap," says Robinson, who was determined to get off the trend treadmill and revive the signature classics that he wore growing up in California.

But first he needed to revive his team's animal spirits. Robinson quickly noticed that few of his staffers were wearing their own designs, never a good sign. Nor were they talking to each other. On his first day he discovered that the accessories people were using a belt pattern that the women's apparel team had stopped using. "You don't want one team doing van Gogh prints and one doing polka dots and stripes," he says. Robinson pulled the two teams into one room. That set the tone. "Before Patrick got here," says Michael Jarvela, who designs men's apparel, "It felt like a scramble."

For several years, Gap, under former Disney (DIS) executive Paul Pressler, relied heavily on focus groups and spent little time in the stores. Early on, Gap North American President Marka Hansen encouraged Robinson to have breakfast with store managers at Gap's flagship on 34th Street in New York City. As he scribbled furiously in a yellow pad, the salespeople pointed out flaws: tank top straps that dug into women's shoulders; confusing sizing that made male shoppers cross-eyed. And they rejected plans to revive a much-loathed novelty item called a sock monkey (yes, a monkey doll made from socks). "It was eye-opening," says Robinson of the meeting with store managers. "They are the only people who don't have a motive except to sell product. I've said to every designer, 'Get into the stores and talk to the salespeople.'"

Since arriving, Robinson has brought a measure of common sense to Gap. But some wonder if his high-fashion background will trip him up. One industry expert says some of Robinson's color choices (purple plaids, anyone?) may be too sophisticated for the everyday shopper. With consumers cutting back and competitors muscling in, Robinson will need to find that delicate balance: turning shoppers on without scaring them off.

Robinson's handiwork is evident in stores, which practically blare the back-to-basics theme. The quality is more consistent. At the Manhattan flagship, the same cardigan is fitted on five mannequins—one in a pink polka dot dress, another in brown slacks and a flowery top, another in pin-striped jeans and silver flats—showcasing different looks for different women. Industry analyst Montagna says more shoppers are buying on first or second markdown rather than the fifth or sixth. It's a sign, however tentative, that consumers are starting to respond to the changes.

Robinson, mindful of the huge challenge ahead of him, knows great clothes can take Gap only so far. "I can design the best T-shirt," he says. "But if we don't put it in the right stores in the right amount of sizes..." Well, that's out of his hands. "It's going to take this whole company to do it," he says.

## Links

### A Mall's New Best Friend?

Foreign retailers are descending on the U.S., Women's Wear Daily reported Aug. 4. WWD says "mall operators have embraced [them] at a time when many American retailers are closing stores or scaling back expansion plans." Latest newcomer: Sandwich, a Dutch purveyor of women's clothing that opened in Las Vegas.

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