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HK: Hong Kong Forum Provides a Unified Platform for Global Apparel Industry to Explore Issues, Find Solutions

Designed as a unified platform for major stakeholders of the global apparel industry, the Prime Source Forum (PSF) has helped promote open dialogue across different segments in the supply chain to address major concerns and explore growth opportunities.

Constructive ideas were generated at the forum through the interaction between the prominent speakers and the audience to tackle various pressing issues, including the rising costs in raw materials and labour and surging consumption in emerging markets.

Over 400 delegates from 21 countries and regions attended the forum. Nearly 70 industry heavyweights and specialists were on various panels to share their insights and experiences.

The organisers of the annual event held from 30 March to 1 April were APLF Ltd, the joint venture between UBM Asia Ltd and its French partner SIC Group. The event's forum sponsor was SWAROVSKI @ ELEMENTS.

Michael Duck, director of APLF, welcomed the delegates and highlighted the new challenges, including the unstable political climate in the Middle East and North Africa and the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. "Risk assessment must be something that all of us need to think about. I would like to point out that this is your debating room. Everyone is expected to join in the discussions. [We welcome] questions, comments and disagreement with the views put forward by the panels – alternative viewpoint is what this forum is all about."

"PSF is a learning exercise for all delegates because they have the opportunity to network with their peers and competitors from around the world and exchange ideas on areas of mutual interest," Mr Duck added.

Meanwhile two workshops were held one day before the forum in which industry leaders reported on the progress of the establishment of a global standard for the apparel industry. Experts updated the participants on the latest industry-focused technological developments. In his introduction to the global standardisation workshop, Thomas Nelson, Chairman of the Global Apparel, Footwear and Textile Initiative and Managing Director of VF Asia Ltd, said the setting of global standards would help reduce complexity in compliance. The enhanced clarity would help to inspire confidence among member organisations and the consumers ultimately.

The forum's keynote speech was delivered by Edwin Keh, former Senior Vice-president and COO of Wal-Mart Global Procurement and a lecturer at The Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania. He encouraged the industry to take ownership to set its long-term course amidst the various challenges to the global supply chain. It should also put further efforts into nurturing future talents across all links in the supply chain.

A total of seven sessions followed, each focusing on a major issue confronting the global apparel sector (see Appendix for the full programme). These included the impact of currency fluctuations on the supply chain. Ligang Liu, Head of Greater China Economics, ANZ, expected Chinese currency renminbi to appreciate by 6 percent in 2011 and suggested the apparel industry to use renminbi as the trade invoicing currency to reduce the risk arising from currency fluctuations.

Sharing his insights on labour issues, Francis Yuk, Senior Vice-president at Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production, suggested factories in Southern China should follow the lead by some factories in other parts of China in providing more benefits to workers, such as day care for their children, as one of the ways to tackle labour shortage.

On material innovation, Pat-nie Woo, Director of Central Textiles (HK) Ltd and Chairman of Sustainable Fashion Business Consortium, said the industry lived in a new paradigm of continuously rising raw material prices. He encouraged companies to develop innovative solutions to redefine cut and sewn material waste as resources and to enhance the inventory management across the chain.

On the last day, the special address by David Dodwell, CEO of Strategic Access Ltd, put into focus the weak links in the supply chain and the importance of conducting 'stress tests' to identify the vulnerable areas. He also challenged the audience to contemplate where the industry was heading in terms of consumption.

Sourcing in Asia and China were the main focuses in the afternoon's sessions. On alternative sourcing hubs to China, Ranjan Mahtani, CEO and Managing Director of The Epic Group, believed China would maintain its leading position in the global supply chain because of its advantages in raw material supply and developed infrastructure. The shift of production to other alternative centres, such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, remained just 'baby steps'.

Regarding talent retention and development, Joachim Hensch, Head of Pattern Design and Technical Development at HUGO BOSS AG and President of the International Association of Clothing Designers and Executives, emphasised the importance of training. "Talents are everywhere. To locate 'heroes' and connect them, social media may help in some ways. We need to assemble an A team for talent development. In Germany, we have 18 pattern designers and a team of five responsible for training, providing guidelines about the work process and finding local heroes [at partner manufacturers]."

PSF 2011 ended with a rousing debate which invited the votes from the audience to decide which side would win. Chaired by Derek Binns, Founder and Managing Director of DBL Consulting, the debate's motion was "This house believes that the internet poses a serious threat to the high street?" After some lively and humorous, yet thought-provoking arguments from both sides, the proponents won by a tight margin.

In its sixth edition, PSF has continued to enjoy support from leading corporations. Participating brands included: adidas; Ann Taylor; Charming Shoppes; The Children's Place; Crystal Knitters; Dick's Sporting; Epic Group; HK Non-woven; HUGO BOSS; Jones Int; Kiabi; Kohl's; Levi's; Li & Fung; lululemon; Nike; Pacific Brands; Perry Ellis; Polo Ralph Lauren; Quiksilver; SWAROVSKI @ ELEMENTS; TAL; Target; Triumph; VF and so on.

In closing Mr Duck said given the abolished quotas and the unrestricted opportunities for outsourcing, the footwear industry faces as many challenges and opportunities as the apparel sector. "Following discussions with the major players in both industries, we have

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decided to reposition the seventh edition of PSF as the global forum for the apparel and footwear industries," he added.

The seventh PSF and Prime Source Fashion will be held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from 28 to 30 March, 2012.

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