

Getting Accurate Apparel Inspections In China

Large and small retailers alike often turn to China for manufacturing; labor is cheap, and compared to domestic production, China's output is often faster and more reliable.

Apparel in particular is well suited for Chinese manufacturing. Chinese factories are great at [reproducing fit dimensions](#) of popular clothing brands, and they provide small businesses with good service when domestic factories refuse to supply small orders.

If you're in the business of selling apparel, sourcing goods from China is a likely scenario; and knowing how to get accurate inspections on orders fulfilled in China is the best way to guarantee quality products, as well as maintain a good working relationship with your Chinese supplier.

Quality Control

Quality control is the best way to maintain standards of manufacturing in China. This is accomplished by testing a sample of the products with specifications you've given to the factory and your inspector.

One of these specifications is called dimensions for tolerance, and it's basically a set of dimensions that allow for a slight margin of error on your garments.

Apparel in particular is subject to these specifications. That's because clothing is typically made by hand, and human error is inevitable. But you can mitigate these errors by providing your supplier with dimensions of tolerance before they begin production.

Dimensions of Tolerance

Depending on the kind of clothing, there are different standards of [high and low tolerance for apparel](#). For example, a loose-fitting t-shirt can have a high tolerance for errors; while a fitted dress-shirt requires a more specific fit, and will have a lower tolerance.

It's important that you specify what the dimensions of tolerance are *before* your supplier begins production, and it's a good idea that your professional inspector is made aware of these dimensions as well. An inspector will use the dimensions of tolerance when it's time to perform quality control.

When it's time to assess the garments, there are different types of on-site testing that you can have an inspector do prior to receiving the completed order. These might include checking the raw materials, patterns, stitches-per-inch, labeling, and dimensions.

Laboratory Testing

Laboratory testing is another type of quality control. Unlike on-site testing, laboratory testing is done off-site and usually completed by a third party.

These tests typically cost more and take longer to complete. They provide detailed information about material composition, and would be most helpful in the event that you suspect your garments are not being made with the correct fabrics or materials.

Laboratory testing can identify issues that can't be seen with the naked eye, so depending on the garment, this might be worth the resources at the beginning of the manufacturing process.

Audit Vs. Inspection

Before we discuss how to ensure a good quality control inspection, let's make sure we know what an inspection entails.

A manufacturing inspection is not the same thing as a manufacturing audit—the difference is a matter of [scale and perspective](#).

An inspection generally looks at what has been done already, and its purpose is to determine (using the dimensions of tolerance and other testing specifications) whether or not the samples pass or fail quality control.

Conversely, an audit looks beyond that by assessing systems, procedures, and protocol to reduce quality control issues from happening in the future.

Ensure a Good Inspection

A good inspection of quality control is determined using simple tables and a little gut instinct.

First, you'll need to determine your Inspection Level: I, II or III.

Ninety percent of all inspections are a level II—it's a baseline for samples of normal to good textile quality. At level I, the inspection level is decreased, and the sample size is smaller; at level III the inspection level increases, and the sample size is bigger.

Imagine that you're confident in your manufacturer and have enjoyed a long working history; you might choose an inspection level of I. Similarly, if you're unfamiliar with the factory and its work is less reputable, you might choose the level III.

There are also [special levels of inspection](#), which can be determined by you and your inspector. This could be necessary for certain tests that require you to deconstruct or permanently disassemble the garment. These tests might be needed if a garment is expensive to produce.

Acceptance Quality Limit

Apparel is typically produced by hand, so your expectations should include some margin for error; it's important to set this margin carefully, so that your sample size is representative of your Acceptance Quality Limit (AQL).

Essentially, this is where you determine the number of defects you think is acceptable in your market, or for your particular business. Just like with the dimensions for tolerance, setting this standard beforehand with your factory and your inspector is a sure way to keep the working relationship amicable in the event of production problems. The AQL is the number of defects you'll allow in a completed order from the supplier.

There are three kinds of defects: critical, major, and minor.

Critical defects are those that can cause harm to the consumer. For apparel, this is almost never the case. Major and minor defects are more common in the apparel industry, and described as defects the consumer would have to think twice about before making a purchase.

An [AQL table](#) is provided by your inspector and will determine (based on your Inspection Level) the number of samples to test, and how many critical, major, and minor defects will be tolerated in the inspection to determine a pass or fail score.

This is why choosing the right Inspection Level and AQL is so critical. If you don't test enough samples, you might miss a critical error. However, if you test too many, you're likely wasting resources.

When to Do an Inspection

More than [80 percent of all manufacturing inspections](#) are performed just before the order ships out. For most apparel items, this makes sense—the products have to be produced in order to test them, and importers are often looking for a final count and proper packaging in addition to quality control.

But be warned: at this point in production, there will be major delays in your order if something is wrong with the garments. This is why some importers choose to do their inspections at a different point in production, like during pre-production, to check up on raw materials and request changes if something unusual pops up.

Depending on your tolerance for risk, and your ability to mitigate other timely factors, picking the right time to do your inspection can save you time and money.

Your best bet is to send an inspector before the factory completes production, and again after production is complete, usually for a final random inspection before shipping. This will ensure that you get the opportunity to catch potential errors, as well as follow up to ensure adjustments have been made.

Short of going to the Chinese factories yourself, there's no easy way to ensure quality control on apparel that's produced more than an ocean away. The best thing you can do is set specific guidelines and expectations with your Chinese manufacturer to ensure both parties receive fair treatment for their time and money.

Knowing how to properly set up an apparel inspection is the first step toward achieving better quality control.