

# Cricket Lee Takes On the Fashion Industry

As many women know, clothing sizes are a mess. Ms. Lee is determined to do something about it.

By Ann Zimmerman

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(See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).)

Like many American women, Cricket Lee was furious with the fashion business. It was a struggle to find clothes that fit, and the sizes on the garments didn't help at all: Every company had its own standard, and few of them seemed to describe women's actual body types.

In 2002, Ms. Lee decided enough was enough. The Dallas product designer and marketer poured all her energy into taking on the apparel industry and changing the way it designed and labeled its wares. Her goal was singularly ambitious. She wanted to create a universal standard for sizing women's clothes -- based on body types as well as measurements -- that could be licensed by any clothing maker and used in any kind of apparel.

"My intention is to standardize fit," says the 55-year-old Ms. Lee. "This is what women in America want."

She couldn't have picked a bigger challenge. Reinventing *any* business is daunting enough. But the fashion industry is notoriously clubby and resistant to change, and it has been sizing clothes the same way for some six decades. On top of that, Ms. Lee is a relative nobody in the business: Before starting her crusade, her previous accomplishments included selling her own line of pet accessories at Saks Fifth Avenue and marketing clothes for a Dallas manufacturer.

Yet with a lot of legwork and determination, Ms. Lee got her foot in the door -- and is starting to realize her dream. Pants with her Fitlogic sizing system have made it onto QVC and the racks at Nordstrom and Macy's. A big apparel company -- [Hartmarx Corp.](#)'s International Women's Apparel division -- is using Fitlogic in some of its styles, as is high-end fashion designer Sherry Cassin.

For entrepreneurs with a big ambition, Ms. Lee's story holds lots of lessons. For one thing, raw persistence can open doors. Even without name recognition, Ms. Lee has landed meetings with major players in the apparel world, from [Target Corp.](#) and [Wal-Mart Stores Inc.](#) to Diane Von Furstenberg's marketing director.

"She's like a dog with a bone," says Marshal Cohen, a retail analyst at market-research company NPD Group and a longtime booster of Ms. Lee's work.

Strategic planning has also been crucial for Ms. Lee. She made sure to do lots of homework before pitching her idea, and she recruited heavyweight allies -- such as Mr. Cohen -- to help her sell it. Moreover, she wasn't afraid to abandon key parts of her plan when they weren't working.

At the same time, Ms. Lee's story is a cautionary tale. Entrepreneurs who want to change the world have to be as patient as they are ambitious -- and they have to be prepared to take lots of knocks along the way. After six years and \$3.5 million in money from investors -- mostly friends -- Ms. Lee has carved out just a small niche in the fashion world. And she has endured lots of rejections and frustrating close calls. Last year, for instance, a major apparel chain agreed to use Fitlogic in several pant lines at a new string of stores. But the weak economy put the retailer's plans on hold.

"It has been a tough six years, but I have never thought of quitting or selling out, because I know this is the right solution to women's frustration with apparel," says Ms. Lee. "Women think there is something wrong with them when clothes don't fit. It's the other way around."

## **Fits and Starts**

The sizing problem is one of the most tangled issues in the fashion business. Today's standards are based on data collected more than 60 years ago, from a very limited group of women: mostly young, fit Caucasians who served in the Women's Army Corps. What's more, when the fashion industry translated that data into a sizing system, it used a very specific type of model to test the fitting: curvy, 5-foot-8-inch women, usually in their 20s. For the most part, that's still the industry's target.

Ms. Lee discovered that this body type represents only about 20% of the female population. Over the years, American women have gotten taller and heavier, and African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians -- who account for a growing share of the market -- often have different body types. The increasing use of vanity sizes further fogs the issue. Some manufacturers put a smaller size on a large garment to make women feel good about buying it. In addition, there's a lack of consistency in sizing across brands.

Ms. Lee started her crusade at a fortuitous time. A nonprofit research group, TC2, was undertaking the first U.S. sizing survey in decades, collecting data on more than 10,000 women across the country. Ms. Lee decided to use that data to come up with her own sizing system.

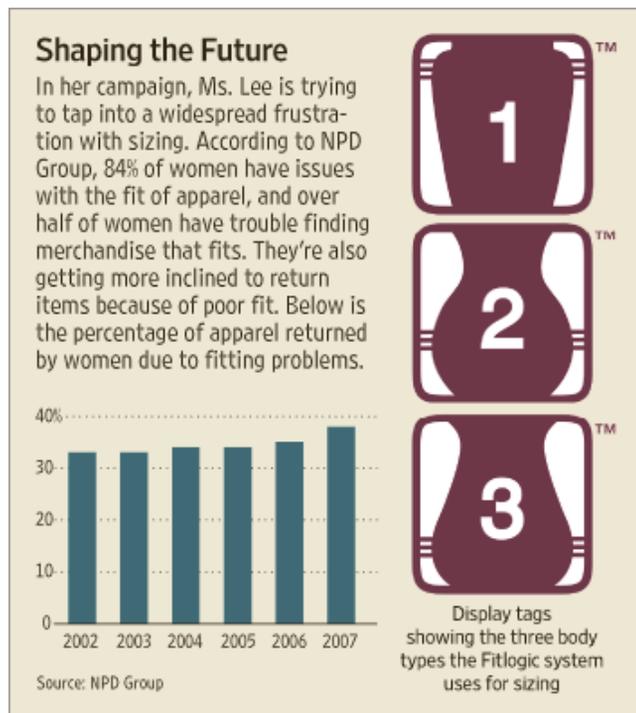
With the help of a pattern maker, she developed Fitlogic. The system breaks women down into three basic shapes: thick waist with thin hips; curvy but proportional; and thin waist with round bottom and large thighs, commonly known as "pear shaped." (Ms. Lee so far has concentrated on below-the-waist sizing, traditionally the trickiest fit for women.)

One of the first hurdles Ms. Lee faced: what to call the shapes. A creative team she hired came up with "straight," "curvy" and "round." But Ms. Lee's daughter, Natasha, who was 11 at the time, recoiled at being called a "straight." "No woman wants to be told they have a straight shape," she said.

So, Ms. Lee embraced Natasha's idea of labeling the body types "1," "2" and "3," respectively. In a store, shoppers would see that number combined with the size of the garment. A "6.1," for example, would be a size 6 garment for someone with a 1 body type. An accompanying graphic would show a silhouette of the body type.

But Ms. Lee realized she would need big allies to help her convince designers and retailers that fit was a big issue, and that her system could boost sales. She recruited Mr. Cohen to her cause with a chat over coffee. The analyst's research had found that frustration over the sizing issue was getting worse. More than one-third of apparel returned by U.S. women gets brought back because it doesn't fit well, Mr. Cohen discovered.

For the past several years, Mr. Cohen has been warning the apparel industry about the perils of bad fit and talking up Ms. Lee's system as a solution. (He isn't compensated for his efforts.)



Ms. Lee's other champion has been David Wolfe, creative director of Doneger Group, a fashion and merchandising consultancy. He met Ms. Lee while giving a presentation to an industry group on fitting problems. "I believed in what she was doing so much, I went with her on her first presentation at Target," says Mr. Wolfe, a 50-year veteran of the fashion industry. "It was the first of her many trials and tribulations."

Ms. Lee's 2003 presentation to Target was not only her first big pitch but also a huge turning point for her plans.

At first, she had planned to launch her own line of pants using Fitlogic sizing. But Target didn't want to take a chance on an apparel line from a relative unknown, Ms. Lee says. The company's internal fit manager also claimed that Target could create its own sizing based on women's shapes.

Target wouldn't discuss details of the meeting with Ms. Lee. A spokeswoman adds that the company "conducts extensive research to determine the appropriate sizes and corresponding specifications for our apparel collections, and we have never offered guests shape-based sizing options."

So, Ms. Lee hatched a bigger plan -- standardizing fit across the industry by licensing Fitlogic to as many apparel makers as possible. She would get a royalty for each garment sold using the system.

In the summer of 2003, her plan faced its first big test: a meeting with a Wal-Mart apparel executive, Celia Clancy. Ms. Clancy offered to buy the Fitlogic system to be used on nine sizes in one line for \$270,000. Ms. Lee turned her down. "They didn't want to use my branding, but wanted to take it and do whatever they wanted with it," she says. "I didn't think that was the answer for the consumer."

Ms. Clancy, now an executive at TJX Cos., says, "At its core, [Ms. Lee] had something very interesting to offer women. We explored it further, but couldn't agree on terms."

Then, in 2004, Ms. Lee landed her first big licensee: Jones Apparel Group Inc., the maker of brands such as Jones New York and Anne Klein New York. The company used Fitlogic in a line of pants that sold on shopping network QVC.

Once again, Ms. Lee learned that she needed to refine her ideas in the face of setbacks. Orders were brisk on QVC, but returns were higher than Jones Apparel expected. The reason: Ms. Lee had just created a Fitfinder on her Web site that allowed women to put in their measurements and find their shape. But the algorithm she used worked for only about 50% of women. Today, the calculator works for 90% of women, Ms. Lee says.

Since then, she has won other big deals. International Women's Apparel, or IWA, has used Fitlogic sizing in several styles of microfiber pants. Last fall, Ms. Cassin, the designer, used Fitlogic in several styles of pants she displayed in trunk shows at high-end boutiques. She sold 500 pairs, 10 times more than she expected. "The results were amazing," says Ms. Cassin. "Women said this was as close to custom-made as you could find."

Now Ms. Cassin is approaching high-end department stores with five fall styles that use Fitlogic.

For all her recent successes, every step of the way has been tough for Ms. Lee. Institutional investors have rebuffed her pitches, leaving her to rely mostly on friends for money and other support. They donate frequent-flier miles for her

travels and give her couches to crash on as she markets her system in different cities. In 2005, she moved to New York to be closer to the apparel industry, leaving her daughter in the care of her ex-husband. She flies back to Dallas most weekends.

Meanwhile, some deals that might have put Fitlogic in the limelight have fallen through. For instance, one Nordstrom Inc. executive -- no longer with the company -- was a big proponent of the system. The executive agreed to let Garfield Marx -- a struggling apparel line that eventually folded -- use Fitlogic sizing in a test at 11 stores and online.

The test went well, but Nordstrom wanted Ms. Lee to find another brand to use the sizing. None were interested. (Jones Apparel, which tested Fitlogic in several venues, was struggling at the time and didn't want to invest in marketing the system.)

## **Familiar Arguments**

And Ms. Lee and her advocates must face the same complaints again and again. IWA President Tom Hall is trying to talk department stores into carrying IWA lines with Fitlogic sizing. Mr. Hall says everyone who sees the system "loves it," but the stores' buyers worry that they will have to stock three times more clothing to cover the new sizes. Ms. Lee says stores would carry the same number of units in a pants line as before but tailor the inventory to their customer base.

Another complaint: Women need to be educated about the system before they're willing to buy into it. When Ms. Lee tested Fitlogic sizing on a Jones Apparel line at 20 Macy's Inc. stores several years ago, the product sold quickly -- as long as Ms. Lee was there to explain the system to shoppers. "Whenever Cricket did an event, it was a runaway success," says Mark Mendelson, former chief merchant officer at Jones Apparel. "But the customer needs explanation."

Some industry insiders say manufacturers may fear they will incur an expense to add the shapes to the manufacturing process. Ms. Lee argues companies can simply reallocate existing resources. Of course, companies must spend extra to pay royalties for the system. But Ms. Lee argues they will make up the cost with increased sales.

Mr. Wolfe thinks the biggest hurdle is the industry mind-set. "The rag trade is competitive and tribal, they don't like to be dictated to," he says. "People in the industry are slow to recognize an obvious solution when it is right in front of them."

Still, the industry may be inching in Ms. Lee's direction. Chico's FAS Inc., an apparel chain tailored to baby boomers with spreading waistlines, created its own sizing system; its styles run from zero to four to take the stigma out of larger sizes. Gap Inc.'s Banana Republic uses names to describe the fit of its pants.

Now Ms. Lee is holding Fitlogic education sessions and fit trials around the U.S. Kathy Harvey, a 54-year-old Dallas housewife who attended one of the sessions, says she can rarely find a pair of pants that fit well because she has a thick waist. When she finds a pair that fits her waist, they're usually too big in the bottom.

After entering her measurements in the [Fitlogic.com](https://www.fitlogic.com) Fitfinder, she learned she was size 4, shape 1, in IWA's Alex New York pants. They fit on the first try. "When you're over 50, it's no fun to be in the dressing room, no matter how thin you are, so the faster you can find your fit, the better," Ms. Harvey says.

—Ms. Zimmerman is a staff reporter in *The Wall Street Journal's Dallas bureau*.

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### **Corrections & Amplifications:**

Product designer Cricket Lee employs an algorithm to help women find apparel that fits their specific shape. A previous version of this article incorrectly said she used a logarithm.

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