

Figure Forms: 3 decades serving the clothing industry

 By [Meagan Duckitt](#)

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Figure Forms is the number 1 technical and fit mannequin supplier in the Southern Hemisphere, not only supplying all the retail giants in SA, but also a force to be reckoned with in Europe, the UK, Asia and the Middle East, amongst others. Meagan Duckitt finds out from Figure Forms directors, brothers Ross and Rory Millam, how the Cape Town-based manufacturer keeps thriving after 30 years.



■ What is Figure Forms?

Figure Forms is a family-owned business specialising in the development and manufacture of custom-made technical mannequins for garment fitting and quality assurance. We supply to large retailers, clothing manufacturers, fashion institutions as well as the couturier and home dressmaker alike.

■ Very interesting name – why Figure Forms?

Not sure. I think our parents wanted a name that was representative of the products that we made, as well as being catchy and easy to remember.

■ How did the company originate?

Alleyne Millam, working for one of the large clothing manufacturers in Cape Town asked her husband Dave if it would be

possible to make a dressform for them to use in the design room.

Dave, an engineer and running his own industrial fiberglass company at the time, took on the project and soon the very first locally-produced fitting mannequin was produced.

Soon after, retailers began approaching us to develop new forms consistent with their fit standard.

Fast forward to 2019 and we now have a current range of over 200 different mannequins across all sizes and ages, catering for both the local South African market and international clothing retailers and their manufacturers.

■ ***You are synonymous with quality and durability. I remember as a fashion student, we only used your brand, 25 years ago! How long has Figure Forms been around?***

Figure Forms was officially registered in 1989, but was manufacturing a couple of years prior to that, so we have been around over 30 years now. Quality has always been our foremost priority when it comes to mannequins. Hence we strive for designs and finishes that are suitable for an industrial environment, while still remaining cognisant of the cost to the customer.

We have some old models coming back for repair every now and then that have been in use for 15, 20 years or longer.



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■ ***People often have the misconception that fit mannequins are all the same size and fit. Is this true, or do you have quite a vast range offering?***

We currently have a range of over 200 fit forms. These cover all ages and sizes, from newborn infants to kids and adults, male and female. Many apparel retailers and manufacturers will fit on a common sample size (e.g. Womenswear size 10/34), and then grade their patterns from that to create the other sizes.

However, one retailer's sizing is often very different to another's – not only just in the number or designation of garment sizes, but how the garments are graded from one size to the next (single sizes, dual sizes, rate of increase from one size to the next/grade rules).

More importantly, the brand fit standard (i.e. the target market/customer) can be incredibly different – for example the age demographic, ethnic group which can relate to body type, range of sizes within their offered size range, etc.

In the case of children, the primary influencing factor is height, and at the rate children grow, a retailer needs to cater to a larger range of sizes. Often a retailer may have to sample in several different ages to fit on, which will lead to a much greater range of fit mannequin sizes being required to cover the range.

Interestingly, some apparel companies are also choosing to fit on different body types now, so that there may be more than one variation of a size 10 for example.

As most people are aware, the human body shape is constantly changing, reflecting our changing diets and lifestyles, so

we have to keep up with the times.

■ ***You are the no. 1 dressmaker mannequin supplier in the Southern Hemisphere. Why do you think customers choose you and not other mannequin manufacturers?***

I think over the years we have built up a strong reputation for customer service and being able to be flexible in terms of customer requirements, particularly when it comes to being able to do custom developments which involve many complex variables. Feedback from numerous customers has been positive in how willing we are to accommodate their requests, which is often difficult for the other big name manufacturers to do.

We've built up lasting relationships with many retailers over the past 30 years, working particularly with South African retailers to improve fit and develop the South African sizing standards.

Our experience and knowledge, the quality and accuracy of our products, as well as our competitive pricing for highly technical forms work in our favour. An important consideration is to be able to bring critical features into our products that are essential for garment design and fit functionality, yet at the same time being able to accurately represent the human body.



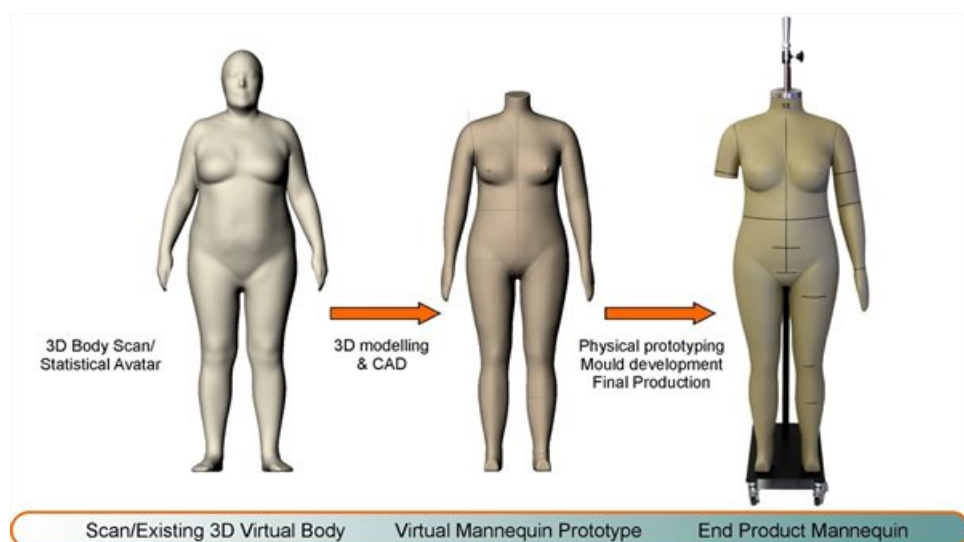
■ ***You are very successful in SA but I see you supply international customers as well. Which countries do you supply to other than SA?***

Australia is the other big market for us, as well as the UK and Europe – more recently France, Germany, and Italy. We may start to look at getting into the US market which would be quite exciting for us. We supply not only to the large and small retail chains and brands, but to their suppliers and manufacturers in Asia, the Far and Middle East, Africa and just about everywhere in-between.

■ ***In [my story](#) earlier this year, I wrote about how 3D technology is taking the world by storm. You are one of the few SA firms offering this service. Tell us more about it?***

The 3D story is of particular interest and is one of those disruptive technologies that are taking the world by storm. We have been collaborating and working with a group of companies in Germany for a number of years, who specialise in Anthropometric (body measurement) surveys, ergonomics, and sizing and fit optimisations for the apparel industry. They are also one of the leading developers of 2D CAD and 3D simulation software.

Concurrent with this collaboration we are also forming partnerships with a number of other leading 3D simulation and visualisation software companies, to be able to offer our fit mannequins as virtual avatars that can be used within these software systems.



As this 3D technology advances and will become more integral in the apparel industry, it will be important for retailers and brands to have continuity of their sizing and their Brand Fit Standards in this digital space. Simply working to the same set of body measurements is not enough when it comes to achieving a consistent and good fit. The body shape, 3D distribution, posture, and certain features of the fit mannequin are essential elements when it comes to product development and fit.

These elements, when translated into the virtual/digital space, need to be consistent with the retailer or manufacturer's existing (physical) fit mannequins (which have been developed through years of R&D, sales history, and are the standards for their sizing and fit for their representative target market and customer).

As such, Figure Forms has been working on the ability to be able to offer just about any of our models as a virtual avatar version, which can be imported and used within the different 3D simulation software systems. Having the ability to provide our avatars regardless of which software system the customer is using, is of great importance to us to be able to service our customer's needs.

We are now one of a few companies globally that can offer high-quality accurate 3D avatars (technical fit mannequins in 3D) that can be integrated into such software and allow retailers or manufacturers to design, visualize and optimize their fit

before going into full production. The time and cost saving of this technology is immeasurable.

▣ ***What does the future hold for Figure Forms? Any new developments?***

Figure Forms continues to strive and build on our core principles which are supplying quality products and being adaptable and receptive to our customers requirements. We are aiming to be a global player not only in the supply of high-quality fit mannequins and dress forms, but also to become a centre of knowledge for body sizing, and the supply of virtual 3D fit avatars.

Connect with Figure Forms via their [their website](#), and on social platforms [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

ABOUT MEAGAN DUCKITT

Meagan is a fashion designer, stylist, writer and public speaker. She owns a small clothing business called Calista Clothing and enjoys using her knowledge to empower women.
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