



## **Time for Change – facing up to fashion’s sustainability and ethical challenges**

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Sustainability is no longer just about doing the right thing, delegates at the latest ASBCI conference were told. It is about building resilience into businesses, of future proofing, and improving efficiency. Non-sustainable business practices are not efficient business practices. Chasing profit at the expense of people and planet may have got us into this mess, but reframing sustainability in terms of increasing revenue and reducing waste might be what gets us out of it.

And action is needed, urgently. Sustainability is evolving at a rapid pace. Sweatshops and water pollution are now just two issues in a long list that includes deforestation, animal welfare, landfill, pesticides, microfibres, plastic pollution, modern slavery, and so many more. Global society is facing a complex web of interrelated issues and it is no longer possible to focus on one area in isolation without the risk of unintended consequences in another. Sustainability must be viewed and tackled in the whole, but its very complexity risks businesses as well as consumers simply switching off.

But that would be a mistake. Speaker after speaker reiterated the point: it is the businesses that adapt, that adopt new, green technologies, and build sustainability into their DNA that will survive and prosper. ‘There are storms ahead,’ said one speaker, and weathering those storms means abandoning the old business models. Assuming the infinite availability of finite resources is nonsensical, and solving the problem isn’t just about closing the loop. It means tackling overconsumption and the negative consequences of a throwaway culture. There was much talk about rediscovering an emotional connection with clothing, but also a recognition that we cannot afford to wait for, or expect, the consumer to change their behaviour. We already know what needs to be done; now it’s time to do it.

‘It is very difficult to be ethical when huge amounts of money are involved,’ fashion commentator **Colin McDowell OBE** told environmental, social, and governance expert

**Michael Spenley** in the conference's opening interview. The wide-ranging conversation between two industry veterans was both damning and hopeful. Colin admitted that some of the things he has seen have made him feel ashamed of both the industry and western consumers who 'just don't care', and he talked about how the power of celebrity and social media encourages 'ludicrous overproduction'. But he also identified designers such as Stella McCartney and Margaret Howell, who are leading the way, and Michael talked about the reframing of CSR that is coming from the finance industry as a way of instilling resilience and adding value to the bottom line. Ultimately, said Colin, if enough people care, things will change, but ethics alone are not moving quickly enough. 'Go to the young,' he told delegates, 'because they still have idealism.'

Ethics aren't working fast enough, agreed **Daphne Guelker** from **UL** as she opened her presentation on modern slavery, which affects 25 million people worldwide. Daphne highlighted red flags that brands and retailers should be aware of in their supply chains, such as subcontracting, as when work is subcontracted the risk of exploitation rises significantly. The main risk for fashion, however, is migrant workers, both refugees and imported workers. Asylum seekers are often not declared, not paid the minimum wage, and may be children. Imported workers pay recruiters to find them work, then find themselves in a strange country and are unable to leave because they may be in debt, have no papers, and no social network. To combat this, brands and retailers should adopt the employers pays principle in respect of all costs of recruitment, map labour supply chains and identify the agents and countries where most labour comes from, and assess recruitment agencies and their practices.

Ensuring the sustainability and continuity of the textile industry in South India has been the focus of a **Shop Direct** labour initiative, **Carly Bilsbrough** told delegates. This aims to tackle labour violations, poor employment practices and working conditions in mills employing young female workers in Tamil Nadu. In collaboration with two other brands and a local NGO, Shop Direct worked with local communities, in schools and with village elders, educating teachers and students about labour laws, child rights, and recruitment, through mediums such as theatre and adolescent peer groups, as well as setting up vigilance committees. The project is also working with agencies on best practices in recruitment, greater transparency on contracts, and matching workers to roles. The next phase will work with mills on policies and procedures and effective grievance systems. 'The textile industry is crucial to South India. We want it to be somewhere girls want to work, free from stigma, where they are safe, secure, and properly paid, and can leave when they want to.'

We are not living within the means of our natural resources, said **Lucy Murphy** from **Shirley Technologies**. 'If consumption continues at its current rate, we'll need three times as many natural resources by 2050 compared to 2000.' Oeko-Tex introduced the Sustainable Textile Production (STeP) certification in 2015 to help production facilities measure and communicate their sustainable manufacturing achievements, and Lucy outlined the steps that two mills in Pakistan have taken to achieve the certification. These include modifying dyes to reduce chemical use and waste, water reuse, renewable energy, and investment in advanced manufacturing technology such as a caustic soda recovery plant and heat recovery boilers. Replacing coal and diesel-powered machinery with natural gas also helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while wastewater cleaning and filtration systems prevent environmental pollution. 'As consumer pressure increases, it is the businesses that take responsibility, use innovative technology, and plan effectively that will survive.'

In the UK each year, £140 million of clothing are sent to landfill – a waste of a valuable resource, said **Vanessa Wakefield** from **Recyclatex**. While some forward-looking brands and retailers operate initiatives such as take-back schemes, leasing, resale and repurposing, these business models are relatively small, and the system remains dominated by open-loop recycling models such as garments made from plastic bottles. 'We need to get to a closed-loop system so that instead of incineration or landfill we have green factories producing new fibres from old and the only waste is compost and water.' Projects to develop fibre-to-fibre recycling on an industrial scale are at various stages but funding can still be an issue. A major attitude shift is required to put the supply chain in place to make use of this resource. Because, as the population grows and the pressure on land use increases, recycling will become more of a priority. 'We made the industry how it is today so we can also make it more circular for tomorrow.'

**Garry Knox** from **GreenEarth Cleaning** argued that sustainable aftercare is a vital element of making fashion circular and avoiding the take, make, dispose model that has dominated for so long. Kinder cleaning can keep garments in use longer, in a better condition, and therefore more likely to be shared and reused, helping to reduce the use of future resources. 'The average life a garment is 2.2 years. If we can make garments just last nine months longer, it can have a significant impact on the environment.' GreenEarth is a silicon-based dry-cleaning solution that is kinder to clothes, the environment, and human health than the most common dry-cleaning fluid, perchloroethylene, which is a petrochemical and subject to phase out in a number of countries. Dry-cleaning is also a closed-loop system that

doesn't discharge microfibres into water systems, and GreenEarth is now working to develop a solution for the wet-cleaning industry.

**Andrew Morgan** from **Coats** talked candidly about the company's journey to develop a proactive sustainability strategy and where it sees itself in the context of the industry-wide sustainability challenge. This year Coats committed itself publicly to forward-looking targets for the first time. These include reducing water use; reducing energy consumption and sourcing from renewable sources where feasible; the addition of ZDHC standards to Coats's existing effluence standards; broadening its community engagement activities; reducing waste and switching all premium threads to 100% recycled polyester by 2024. 'As an industry we're facing storms ahead. At Coats we are a tiny player; what we provide is less than 1% of the weight of a product. But we want to participate in the collaborative enterprises needed to face up to the storm. We are looking for people to work with to make the circularity of garments more realistic, and thread can play a role in this.'

Almost a third of all fibre used in textiles is cotton. It is the number one raw material used by **M&S**, and **Phil Townsend** outlined the retailer's journey towards sourcing more sustainable cotton, which began in 2007. Starting with a commitment to source 50% more sustainable cotton by 2020, M&S has this season seen its entire clothing range made from 100% sustainable cotton – one of the first retailers to reach this milestone. Key to this achievement is the Better Cotton Initiative, the largest sustainable cotton programme in the world. Phil illustrated the impact of BCI with two case studies, including a joint project in Telangana in India working with 35,000 farmers that is now self-financing. The project achieved a 30% reduction in waste and a 50% reduction in pesticides while increasing yields and profits for farmers. 'The BCI is one of the most successful raw material initiatives in any industry. While there is still more to do, it shows that we can transform a global commodity and put it on a more sustainable footing.'

**Peter Hughes** from **Eurofins / BLC Leather Technology Centre** addressed the complexity of sustainability in the context of the rise of vegan products, particularly alternatives to leather. Leather is a biproduct of the livestock industry and therefore must bear a share of its environmental and animal welfare concerns, growing awareness of which is increasing consumer interest in vegan alternatives. Sustainability is often cited as a reason, but it is not as simple as that. Not using leather simply creates another waste stream, while to achieve the performance and durability of leather, alternatives require added chemistry, including

PU coatings, which make them hard to recycle or incinerate. There are two competing issues – animal welfare and plastic pollution – and they can't be addressed in isolation. 'We need to look at sustainability as a whole. The world is facing multiple and interrelated challenges and unless we can understand the bigger picture in which these challenges fit, we will only end of mitigating problems or providing superficial solutions.'

Fast fashion does not have to mean throwaway fashion said **Grace Downes** and **Kristian Lee** from **Missguided**, as they explained how the online retailer is incorporating sustainability into a business model that has been criticised for fuelling overconsumption. The retailer's buying strategy is shaped around minimising waste, with small initial orders that test a line's popularity before purchasing in volume. Stock is air freighted only when necessary and 22% of production is the UK. The brand is fast fashion in the sense that styles get to market in less than four weeks, but price points are affordable rather than cheap and products are neither designed nor intended to be disposable. In fact, the brand leverages its social media to promote the re-use and re-styling of garments. Missguided is also working to reduce packaging and is working with its supplier of polybags and despatch sacks to develop a closed-loop recycling process. It also incentivises click and collect to consolidate deliveries and minimises returns through consistent fit standards and accurate product descriptions.

'Is profit a bad thing?' asked **Jackie Lewis** from **Alvanon** as she made the business case for sustainability and argued that it is just a new buzzword for efficiency. 'We need to change language we use. That it's the right thing to do doesn't motivate businesses to change, but if we tell them they can make more money, be more productive, reduce waste, and drive their reputation – that might do something.' Jackie's five steps to a sustainable business start with giving people the training they need to make the right decisions. 'Do your designers have the skills to create sustainable products?'. It also requires transparency – if you don't know who makes your clothes, you need to. And giving back. Less than 0.2% of the revenue in this industry is given back to the communities in which it operates. We can do better. Then efficiency – if businesses aren't run efficiently, they aren't run sustainably. Do you really need first stage samples? Finally, privacy. This is a newer concern, but a growing one, and businesses need to respect customers' data in an increasingly digital world.

**Dr Mark Sumner** from the **University of Leeds** asked whether educating consumers – or attempting to educate them – on the vast array of confusing and often conflicting sustainability issues will change behaviours or have the opposite effect. We live in a

consumption society that makes a virtue out of buying and owning 'new' things. It's not about need, except in the sense of fulfilling a desire, and more about the satisfaction derived from making a purchase and making a statement about our status, style, wealth, or attractiveness. And while society is starting to think about ethical consumerism, ethical concerns will be sacrificed before any of these non-verbal communication functions are compromised. And as consumers we react badly to sustainability education, especially at the point of purchase. It is hard to engage with complex issues when we want to enjoy shopping, and as a result we resort to habit. This means that sometimes the consumer has to be ignored. 'Consumers are not rational. Do what you know is right,' said Mark.

The UK's per capita consumption of new clothing is the highest in Europe and 300,000 tonnes ends up in household waste every year. Changing that is going to take a sea change in business practices, technology and infrastructure, and consumer behaviour. And it has to change, because we only have the resources of one planet to draw on. Business as usual is no longer viable, no longer linear. The success stories of the future will be circular.