



Doing the right thing?

Best practice for sustaining our people, planet and profits

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The ASBCI's recent conference on sustainability in the fashion supply chain offered a blend of harsh reality and hope for the future. This is an industry worth an estimated \$2.4 trillion, but it is also one of the most polluting, second only to oil. A huge 12-20% of industrial water pollution results from textile dyeing and treatment, a vast quantity of textiles end up in landfill, microplastics and fibres are polluting the oceans, and human rights and labour abuses are endemic in the supply chain.

Focusing on the role and responsibility of the global textile industry in tackling some of the most pressing environmental challenges facing the world today, the speakers made it clear that while good work is being done across the supply chain, there is a very long way to go. The critical message for brands, however, was not just the need to take action but the need to take it together. Unless this industry builds strong partnerships with other companies, including competitors, both within and outside the sector, meaningful progress towards a sustainable future will be difficult to achieve.

Rakesh Vazirani from **TUV Rheinland** set the stage with an introduction to the global garment industry and how its development over the last 200 years has led to where we are today – trying to redress past damage while creating a sustainable pathway for the future. The complexity of the modern supply 'web' means there are significant risks for businesses but opportunities lie in pursuing sustainability goals. The goal posts will always be moving but numerous industry initiatives, such as ZDHC (Zero Discharge of Harmful Chemicals), the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, and the Sustainability Working Group, provide frameworks for improvement. And, in February 2017, the OECD published due diligence guidance for responsible supply chains in the apparel and footwear sector. Done right, sustainability should be a win for consumers, companies, their suppliers, the economy, and the environment. To achieve it, the fashion industry has to get naked. Transparency is everything.

There is more to be gained from supply chain transparency than anyone stands to lose, agreed **Tara Luckman** from **Asos**. Without transparency in the supply chain, it is impossible for brands to meet sustainability goals and keep their promises to customers. It's all about data – obtaining it and managing it. Enhanced data is not just necessary for compliance, but the greater visibility it affords enables Asos to identify and promote best practice and target its sustainability efforts towards its biggest impacts. Technology has a huge role to play but alone it is not enough. Flexible, future-proof systems must be backed up by robust partnerships and many layers of reporting and verification to support the necessary interrogation of who, where, and how products came to market. A cultural shift in supplier relationships will also be necessary, and for Asos this means suppliers are assessed not simply on profitability but on their attitudes and actions towards sustainability.

Don't underestimate the scale of the challenge or how much needs to change, warned **Mike Barry**, director of sustainable business at **M&S**. M&S started its sustainability journey ten years ago with Plan A, and that journey is only 20% complete. The planet is facing an environmental crisis, and incremental improvements are not enough - business models must be fundamentally disrupted to deliver value for society and the environment as well as customers. We cannot continue on our current path of ever-increasing production to meet the demands of an exploding middle class and rising global population. Businesses must take control of their footprint, build sustainability into everything they do, engage with customers, build partnerships - including with competitors - and aspire to truly sustainable business models. Technology offers solutions but must be used responsibly, and collaborations and coalitions at the highest levels are essential to drive the industry towards a sustainable future.

Sustainability starts with raw materials, said **Robin Anson** from **Textiles Intelligence**, and both natural and man-made fibres have their downsides. It's not so much a question of whether one is better than the other, but rather how each can be improved. Cotton's sustainability challenges are well documented, but cotton production has peaked and its market share is shrinking. As demand increases, the growth will come from man-made fibres, particularly synthetics, which have durability and cost advantages. However, these are made from fossil fuels and can't provide all the properties consumers require. There is an opportunity, therefore, for an expansion of cellulosic fibres, which are made from renewable sources but are water-intensive. There are numerous recycling initiatives for synthetics, particularly polyester, and natural fibres, but are these enough? Sustainable

fibres still represent only a small fraction of overall global production, so there is both scope for growth and a need for improvement.

Interlinings supplier **Freudenberg** has incorporated sustainable fibres into every sector of its business, reducing water use by 75%, energy by 47%, and CO2 by 55%. This needs to be communicated to customers, said **Nigel Towell**, because education is central to making sustainability profitable. More than simply reducing its footprint, Freudenberg wants to maximise its handprint by acting as a sustainability enabler for customers by providing sustainable products and services. Innovation is a driver. Recycled polyester is a top trend because it delivers significant benefits and is easy to communicate. Freudenberg currently processes seven million PET bottles every day at a factory in Italy. Other initiatives include the first formaldehyde-free factory, and biodegradable interlinings. These stories need to be told, within the industry and to consumers, said Nigel, because it is only through working together and helping customers to analyse the impact of their choices and take action that sustainability can be a success.

Cotton has a murky past and a troubled present, but its future holds promise, said **Graham Burden** from **Sustainable Textiles Solutions**. Pesticides and water are two of cotton's key environmental issues, and GM (Bt) cotton is one of its most controversial. Cotton cultivation is also rife with social and human rights issues, including forced labour in Uzbekistan, and market manipulation is a problem. 'Identity cottons' represent the efforts to improve sustainability. These include organic cotton, Fairtrade, Cotton Made in Africa, and the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), and while there are pros and cons to each, these initiatives are starting to bear fruit. Organic cotton has seen sustained growth in the UK for the last three years, and BCI cotton is now grown across 11 countries. Supply of these sustainable cottons stands at 13% of global production. Take up of this by brands and retailers, however, remains low at just 17% - that is the challenge for the industry.

Water scarcity is one of the most critical issues facing the textile industry, and taking control of supply chains and participation in industry-wide initiatives are key tools for brands to take this on, said **Elaine Gardiner** from **Berghaus**. Initiatives such as chemical management system Bluesign can help tackle water pollution by controlling the use of chemicals in the supply chain, while the Higg Index can help brands identify the gaps in their sustainability strategy and facilitate the reporting and sharing of data between brands and suppliers. But most important is innovation, and finding a way to eliminate water use in the treatment and

dyeing of textiles. The industry needs viable, commercial solutions that are realistic for small brands, such as Berghaus Colourkind fabrics. These save water, energy and chemicals by adding dye at the first stage of the fibre process, and Berghaus is on course to save nine million litres of water as a result.

Recognition that there is problem with end-of-life clothing is the only way that closed loop systems will be commercialised, said **Ross Barry** from clothing and textiles reuse and recycling company **LMB**. There are limited possibilities for garment recycling in its present form, and while the reuse model works – 60% of the clothing received by LMB is exported for reuse - it is not the best model. Until the waste sector stops sending garments to landfill and disposal becomes a visible problem, there will be no incentive to truly commercialise systems that take used garments back to their original fibres for reuse as clothing. Opportunities do exist for retailer take-back schemes, however, and the industry is looking at different models. It's a case of finding what works for your business, whether that is offering discounts in exchange for returned garments, installing collection points in stores or enabling consumers to sell garments back online.

We don't just need to be closing the loop, we need to be slowing it, said Professor **Tim Cooper** from **Nottingham Trent University**. Clothing consumption accounts for more than 5% of the UK's annual carbon and water footprints, but 30% of the clothing in the average UK wardrobe hasn't been worn for at least a year. Lessening these impacts is not just a question of improving sustainability in the supply chain and scaling up recycling efforts. As we move towards a circular economy we need to explore ways to capture the residual value in discarded clothing. Simply extending the active life of a garment by nine months can reduce its carbon, waste and water footprints by 20-30% each. We need to reduce the flow of materials by encouraging retailers and brands to adopt business models that support clothing longevity, and find ways of changing the high volume/low value nature of modern economies.

Consumption, as Mike Barry pointed out, is the heart of the challenge. This was echoed by Alistair Knox, chairman of the ASBCI, in his closing remarks. As the world's population continues to grow along with desires for improved living standards, sustainability pressures will grow accordingly. He thanked all the speakers and conference sponsors TUV Rheinland for highlighting not only the key issues but also ways forward for the fashion industry.