

# Sustainability

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN ON THE HIGH STREET?

**INITIALLY, YOU MIGHT FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE THAT THE FASHION AND TEXTILE INDUSTRY IS THE SECOND LARGEST POLLUTER IN THE WORLD, SECOND ONLY TO OIL. HOWEVER, WHEN YOU CONSIDER ALL OF THE CHEMICALS AND WATER USED IN PRODUCTION, PLUS THE AMOUNT OF WASTE AND THE SHEER VOLUME OF GARMENTS BEING MADE, IT'S HARDLY SURPRISING.**

It's wonderful to see that there's such a huge interest and demand for both ethical and sustainable products and materials at the moment. It feels like the industry and consumers are finally starting to realise the damage that has been done and many now feel a duty to undo this. Any step in the right direction can only be a good thing, but the problem is, there is a lot of confusion among both brands and shoppers. People are wondering what exactly ethical and sustainable means in today's industry, particularly as there aren't official guidelines or regulations on this. As fashion industry professionals, what should we be thinking about and how can we make better choices for our swim and beachwear production?

First off, it's important to note the difference between ethical and sustainable. Both seem to be promotional buzz words at the moment, which isn't really doing retailers any favours. It's making it really hard for the conscious buyer to know if they're making the right choice. If you've ever tried to do any work around either ethical trade or sustainability, you'll know it's a bit of a minefield and an incredibly complex issue, one which often means different things to different people.



Speedo's H20 Active Range uses Powerflex Eco, fabric made from fibres created from old fishing nets – they also run a Take Back Programme which feeds Speedo's own waste to create raw materials for eco-friendly nylon

Ethical trade is most commonly thought of in terms of the factory workers. Are they paid a living wage? Is their workplace safe? Do they get breaks and holidays? Are they treated fairly and with respect? This in itself can be a challenge to verify, but add in the same considerations for the people who make your fabrics, trims, labels and packaging and it becomes a lot to take in. Many people would also consider the welfare of any animals involved with the production

of things like leather, wool, angora and down. Thankfully, for the most part this is less of a consideration for those of us in the beachwear market as typically we don't use these materials very often.

Sustainability can often be considered in three parts. The first is the origins of the raw materials. Most of us are familiar with the concept of organic fabrics and recycled fibres and thankfully these days there's a huge range of fabric options, and trims are becoming more widely available as well. Lately, it feels as though there's a cutting edge textile development hitting the headlines every day. Do proceed with caution though and read between the lines. Sadly, all too often suppliers use 'ethical' or 'sustainable' as part of a sales pitch and in reality these words have very little meaning. When it comes to sustainable fabrics, we need to ask ourselves; is the raw material renewable, does the process use harmful chemicals and/or a lot of water and will it bio-degrade?

Bio based fibres are often considered one of the most sustainable options, as of course these can continue to grow indefinitely, if properly managed. The reason this can be a grey area is down to the management aspect - if trees are being cut down to make fabrics and aren't being replanted, this of course isn't eco friendly. The key here is to look out for materials from a sustainably managed forest, which have been processed in a responsible way. Fibre options include bamboo, modal, lyocell and Tencel (a brand name for



Stidston is a London based business focussing on quality cuts, recycled materials and local production

lyocell) and in swimwear there are two very recent but dramatic innovations: ECONYL® by Aquafil which is 100% recycled ocean waste such as nets and plastic bottles and Seaqual 4U is a recycled polyester yarn derived from plastic on the sea bed. Although cotton and viscose are from natural sources, they can often be very damaging for the environment but companies such as Lenzing with their EcoVero option are making a difference. Cotton is often considered the world's dirtiest crop, due to the huge amount of water and chemicals used by many growers. If you want to use cotton, it's worth looking for a low water, organic option. Viscose is made from wood pulp and usually uses a lot of chemicals in the manufacture process, many of which are toxic such as caustic soda and sulphuric acid.

Manufacture can be a nightmare for the environment, as well as workers themselves. Dyes and fabric finishing techniques often require a huge amount of water and all too often harmful chemicals are released into local rivers. It's said that in regions with a lot of textile mills, the rivers run the colour of the fashion season. The chemicals cause problems for the local communities who end up consuming the chemicals through their drinking water. Many people are also unaware that, depending on the toxins used, the negative effects can also be felt by the end wearer of the clothes. By using suppliers who use a closed loop production system and non-toxic dyes, you can greatly reduce the negative impact on the environment and subsequently people and animals who come into contact with it. A closed loop system means that water is recycled, rather than replaced and it also means that chemicals are kept in the system, rather than being released. If you're concerned about harmful chemicals and the impact these can have on people who wear your clothing, you can look out for Oeko-Tex approved fabrics, which have been independently tested for harmful substances.

Truly sustainable brands also consider the after life of the product. First off, they design products to last, by using quality materials and techniques to ensure their clothes are functional for years to come. They avoid creating garments that will need to be disposed of after a few wears. They also think ahead, to what will happen to the garment when it finally does show signs of wear and tear. Some companies are introducing repair and/or recycling programmes, whereas others are looking at products which are completely biodegradable. The aim is to avoid having products sent to landfill, particularly those which could take the next 200 years to biodegrade.

Also keep in mind that the concept of an ethical and sustainable business goes beyond garment production. It also includes the day-to-day running of the brand and the additional materials that come with it, like business cards, packaging, retail stores and distribution. For those of us wanting to minimise the



negative impacts of our business, there are steps we can take. It can sometimes take a bit of detective work to find the option that's truly sustainable, but the options are there. There are also steps that we as businesses can take, which don't rely on others.

For instance, by being better designers, we can find more economical ways of utilising our materials. More often than not, the lay plan isn't considered as part of the design process. But, if we pay attention to fabric usage, not only can we use less raw materials, we'll also reduce our cost of goods. You've probably heard of 'zero waste fashion', where all of the fabric is utilised, without creating any waste. Innovative thinking like this can help our sustainability efforts without altering our supply chain. A similar strategy can be used for our packaging; by assessing what is actually needed vs what you're currently using, you might find you can save money as well as resources.

By considering others during every stage of your business and also educating your customer, you can make a huge difference to the negative effect that your brand is having. If you want to learn more about sustainability or ethical trade, thankfully information is very easy to come across these days. A simple Google search can reveal a multitude of innovations, ideas and sourcing options, but my personal favourite way to learn more is through events. There's been a huge rise in the amount of information available at trade shows on sustainability, both via exhibitors and also the seminars which many shows run. Some of the organisers even feature recordings of their seminars online, which you can access from anywhere. If you want to make the change and move to being a more sustainable business, the options are out there, it's just a case of making the most of them.

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British boys, Riz, add tailoring skills to the humble beach short and vibrant colour in garments that are made from plastic bottles which are given new life into 100% recycled polyester

Turn to page 76 to read more about Davy J, just launched in 2017