

FASHION LEADERS SPEAK – 24th September 2008

Chair – Joanna Yarrow

Panel – Christine Driscoll, Edun

Amy Benstead, Stirling Group

Ben Ramsden, Pants to Poverty

Claire Hamer, Topshop

Simone Cipriani, United Nations

Christine Driscoll – Edun

The large turn out for this event shows how important and relevant the issues of sustainable fashion are. We have to hope that the current economic climate does not halt the growth or prioritisation of the issues.

Ethical fashion is much more about the journey than the final destination, as this will continually change. Pioneering businesses need to be flexible, they need to be ready to shift and innovate with changing boundaries and expectations.

Edun, established in 2005, is about producing beautiful clothes that also help to develop and build sustainable growth within suppliers communities.

Edun prides itself on beautiful sophisticated design, but recognises that this can be difficult when working with small scale producers to ensure that quantities and quality can be met. Edun Live is a range of simple organic t-shirts produced in Africa. Simple design means quality and quantities are more easily maintained and assured. These t-shirts are then targeted to commercial companies and retailers, for merchandising, campaigns etc, which encourages the growth and accessibility of organic and fairtrade products on a basic everyday level.

Conservation Cotton Initiative – trains farmers in organic cotton agriculture.

Edun and Edun Live portray the cool, sexy and vibrant life of Africa and it's people – avoiding the stereotype of famine and abject poverty. They focus on the positive rather than the negative. They want consumers to feel good about the brand and it's products on different levels above and beyond a pity purchase.

The facilities are constantly developing and improving to create more sophisticated pieces, including the first 100% African fleece made using African sourced fibres.

Already Edun has raised £600000 to put back into African Aids initiatives.

www.edunonline.com

www.edun-live.com

Amy ??? – Stirling Group, Management Trainee

The Stirling Group is a major supplier to M&S, based in Manchester, supplying lingerie, swimwear, womens and kids wear.

Being affiliated to M&S they are responding to the Plan A initiative, and implementing change within their supply chain.

There is the growing awareness of the company's ability to contribute to sustainable livelihoods and reducing poverty within the supply chain.

The shared goals of Plan A include efficiency initiatives and investment and development for the factories and their workers.

Example of new factory development in Sri Lanka – new state of the art manufacturing plant, energy efficient and strategically located for transport links and communication.

Has regenerated the local area and provided local businesses with grants for development. They invest locally and employ locally, avoiding using only ex-pat managers. There is subsidised food and other benefits for employees and by supporting the local school and improving education local children may also eventually work for the Stirling Group ensuring continued growth and long-term benefits.

www.stirlinggroup.com

Ben Ramsden – Pants to Poverty, Founder

The overall goal is to raise awareness and initiate widespread change to those producing products.

The concept started with the Make Poverty History campaign, which looked to create social change, which Pants to Poverty believe is possible from cotton to bottom!

So the question is how can we do something positive, to take action and create change?

PTP want to rid the world of bad pants! Publicity campaigns have involved a flash mob at Parliament square, and world record attempts at music festivals. It brings a sense of humour and enjoyment to the fight against poverty. Pants are a symbol of what can be bad and good in products and their production and they are something worn by every person on the planet so are relevant to us all. There needs to be a bad pants amnesty!

We live in a culture of frenzied consumerism, we each need to readdress our part in it, to challenge ownership and take responsibility, to get engaged. Fashion can give motivations and aspirations, it can have the power to change the world.

www.pantstopoverty.com

Claire Hamer – Topshop, Buyer

The high street is in a powerful position to create change – by giving shelf space to fairtrade and organic products it gives it a higher profile and exposes it to the mainstream consumer.

There is a new direction and focus in the fashion industry, these are exciting times as we are on the cusp of real and lasting change.

Whatever your role in fashion you need to constantly look for opportunities, to educate yourself and to take the initiative to make change. There is a real opportunity to make positive changes within large businesses.

Within Topshop, by working through key stakeholders and social enterprises, awareness has grown, and people are becoming more informed. It is important to create partnerships

internally, to work more cohesively, to make more informed decisions and to work towards the triple bottom line – not just economic growth, but social and environmental issues too.

Everyone agrees now that ethical is the future but not everyone knows how to go about it. Support and collaboration needed.

There are many different objectives to these initiatives – developing new markets, building capacity for small communities and cottage industries, developing new skills and encouraging traditional skills, empowerment, education, improving health and wellbeing. It makes good business sense to invest in fashion that not only looks good but makes you feel good on the inside.

Topshop supported initiatives-

Design4life Ghana - EFF and Tabiesa sponsored competition, placed UK designers with Ghanaian batik dyers to create ranges for Topshop – which sold out. Has helped to develop their businesses and community.

Made – Fairtrade accessories and jewellery, started out in the slums of Nairobi, now employs 40 people full time in a purpose built workshop and provides a better quality of life for employees and their families by supporting the local school.

Topshop wants to create platforms for collaboration with designers and brands. By being involved in Re:Fashion we can celebrate what has been achieved and look to how we can continue moving forward by seizing the opportunities to make a difference.

www.topshop.com

www.topshop.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/StaticPageDisplay?storeId=12556&catalogId=19551&identifier=ts1%20about%20corporate (corporate responsibility page)

Simone Cipriani – Senior Market Development Officer, International Trade Centre (an agency of the United Nations)

The Africa Inspires project looks to create a sustainable market for disadvantaged communities in Sub-Saharan Africa by building links and access between businesses and designers in the UK with African suppliers and producers.

When we talk about ethical fashion we need to talk about the story, because that holds the power.

For example - Benedicta, lost her whole family to Aids but now devotes her time to making and selling accessories made from plastic straws to support Aids orphans that she has taken into her care. This is development from the grass roots that can have a lasting and meaningful impact on people's lives.

Certification and accreditation can only go so far in giving meaning to ethical fashion.

The story on a human level is more powerful, to see the poverty reduction and the positive impact development can have.

Fairtrade and paying producers a fair price is crucial - as it then allows people to create and work for change for themselves, from a grass roots level – this is much more sustainable than a top down method, where change is dictated and may not be appropriate.

The UN hopes worldwide communication of people's stories will raise consumer awareness.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Q: Lucy Wilts – Jewellery designer for Revamp

Encourages recycling and reusing old, throwaway items, and also building communities for sharing ideas.

Is ethical fashion an add-on issue, or is there potential for it to be fully integrated into consumer habits?

Simone – Currently it is just a segment of the market, but inevitably it will become more fully integrated. It will continue to grow and become the permanent agenda.

Claire – Ethical covers a broad range of issues, appealing to a broad range of consumers. We are on the cusp of change but crucially there has to be consumer demand – as that grows the more it will be provided by retailers.

Joanna – What will the situation be in 10 years time? Ideally conversations like this will not be necessary as ethical will be the norm.

Ben – There is definitely consumer demand, and we have to appreciate that it is not just about money but looking for rewards in other ways. An ethical approach will become mainstream, so those who don't address the issues or get involved will be left behind.

Christine – There is undeniable growth which in some cases has outstripped consumer demand – there is slower conversion to purchase due to the price premiums. But mainstreaming organic/fairtrade etc has its own problems – as quantities increase mass producers will push out and price out smaller businesses again. The dynamics of large and small producers need to be managed carefully.

Amy – M&S business grows from strength to strength which shows that people really do care.

Joanna – The importance is keeping the products fabulous and desirable, as well as ethical, which is crucial for moving the sector onwards.

Q: Sarah from online ethical magazine, greenmystyle.com

What is the media's role in changing consumer behaviour?

Clare – The media need to be well informed on the issues. They can present case studies and the stories behind products which bring people together, evoke empathy and illustrate the human side of every product.

Ben – The media can be incredibly powerful and has the reach to educate millions of people. PTP use the media as a megaphone for their message, essentially the media is free advertising.

Christine – The media has helped to increase awareness, but needs to be informed and accurate so the consumer has the facts. There is a risk of oversaturation, but there is better for there to be more rather than less so that the message gets through to more people. Ethics are not just a flash in the pan issue, it is a long-term subject that the media needs to keep reporting.

Amy – The recent Marie Claire Eco issue shows how the info is being brought to the mainstream consumer. Often people are interested but don't know how to access fairtrade

or organic products, but magazines like this are informative and help ethical businesses grow.

Joanna – There has been a changing perception of ethical fashion over recent years. It is incredibly diverse, living, growing and changing – the media need to keep on top of this.

Q: To Amy – is the factory in Sri Lanka the first of many? Is it to be repeated?

Amy – It is the second factory built in Sri Lanka, and follows the M&S Plan A strategy for improvement that the Stirling Group are looking to implement with all their suppliers, be that building new improved facilities or improving the efficiency at existing factories.

Q: With looming climate change is organic cotton really the answer? What else could we do – for example GM can be higher yielding using less water, isn't that more environmentally friendly?

Ben – Organic works with, rather than against nature, reducing pesticides and the use of other toxic chemicals. We need to work towards the goal of a sustainable solution to growers, getting the highest yield without the negative environmental impact. We can support best practise, conservation and intelligent farming. There are better long term solutions than GM.

Simone – We must be pragmatic, we can take a many different layers approach, using a range of solutions and there is no absolutely black and white right and wrong.

Q: What sort of advice can the panel offer a small company trying to get set up? The costs are prohibitive with doing the groundwork, sourcing producers, bringing it to market. It is especially difficult to meet minimum quantity requirements.

Simone – the challenges are undeniable, but there are often funding options and support from organisations like EFF.

Ben – sometimes you can pool together with other small businesses to meet minimum orders. Research into different organisations, funding, networking and support is very important as there are often options available.

OTHER EVENTS AND PROJECTS

Made By – Alannah

Made By was established in 2004 by Solidaridad, a Dutch NGO (like Oxfam). The aim is to make sustainable fashion widespread and common practice and by communicating these environmental and social benefits to the consumer.

Made By works with brands to tackle social change and environmental problems within the supply chain – from the crop to the end garment. It communicates this with complete transparency and tracability to the consumer using the label concept.

Made By works with existing standards and certification/auditing bodies, and also sets future targets for continual improvements.

www.made-by.org/?lg=en

RE:Fashion – Cyndi Rhoades

The first awards to celebrate brands and businesses that are actively improving environmental and social standards in the fashion industry. The ultimate aim is to make the 'ethical' in Ethical Fashion obsolete!

RE:Fashion awards, 13th November, Shoreditch Town Hall

www.refashionawards.org

New Entrepreneurs – Alex McIntosh, Ethical Fashion Forum

The New Entrepreneurs programme will target new designers and businesses, offering opportunities to learn about sustainable business practices and business planning. The project is funded and supported by the LDA and City Fringe. There are various workshops offering support and training over the next few months.

www.ethicalfashionforum.com/15.html

Fashioning an Ethical Industry – Hannah Higginson

FEI have released a new magazine, Sense, for students and tutors showcasing student work from around the UK, interviewing ethical fashion professionals and raising awareness of ethical issues in the fashion industry. This magazine can be ordered from the FEI website.

www.fashioninganethicalindustry.org

Centre for Sustainable Fashion – Nina Baldwin

Based at the London College of Fashion, the CSF looks to encourage students to tackle the issues of ethics and sustainability in all aspects of the fashion industry. As the professionals of tomorrow students need to challenge the industry and push the agenda through research, development and innovation.

These issues will be delved into more deeply at the first Sustainability Conference held at the London College of Fashion, 27th – 28th October 2008.

www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/csf