

FASHION + “Spotlight on Sourcing”

Sustainable Fabrics and Components

Welcome from Tamsin Lejeune, Director and founding member of EFF

The Fashion+ events aim to put a spotlight on sourcing. The goal is to bring people together, to facilitate links across the industry, so that more can be achieved by working together.

This event is the first of a series, looking at the ways fashion designers, buyers, businesses large and small, can make a real difference. By overcoming the challenges of sourcing sustainably, and understanding the positive impact your role within the fashion industry can have on a global level.

Discussion chaired by Clare Lissaman

Abi Rushton – Ethical and Sustainable Sourcing, Tesco Clothing

‘Sustain to maintain’ is Tesco’s motto. Tesco look to maintain the environment, their social credentials and profits, without having to compromise on any of these.

The Tesco Community Plan looks to increase the responsibility taken for the control of the supply chain, with the values of fairness and honesty playing a central role in this.

Tesco has to look at things from a business angle, and to consider what the customers want. A UGov report from 2006 showed that 78% of consumers wanted to know more about the clothes they were buying and 31% didn’t buy an item of clothing due to concerns they had about how the item was made.

Sustainability has to become business as usual, become something that is absorbed and implemented across the whole business. The changes need to become embedded into the business strategy and be more than a one season wonder.

Steps Tesco have made within clothing include changing all their core T-shirts and all their men’s Stonebay T-shirt range to Fairtrade cotton. This, and other initiatives, supports 19000 farmers in developing countries.

There is a need to balance the needs and aspirations of the Tesco customer with those of the farmers and workers in developing countries. The customer is looking for a product that they can trust, but the worker has much more basic needs for services such as farming equipment, education, health care etc. The power and impact of having a stable

income does not just affect the employee and their family, but spirals out to the wider community and benefits many more indirectly.

Another initiative is developing 'green factories'. Controversy surrounds this as it can be seen as a showy gesture, sometimes inappropriate to the area, which can use up resources for the building of a new factory. Tesco, where possible, encourage greener and smarter ways of working in existing factories. The practicalities of this mean production is more efficient, lower running costs, a better working environment for workers and a lower environmental footprint.

Transparency and traceability of the supply chain are emphasised as one of the most important issues within sustainability. This is a difficult task with a company the scale of Tesco, but without transparency between the retailer/designer and both supplier and customer sustainability can not move forward.

Rani Patel and Lucy Jones – Rani Jones

Rani Jones was set up in April 2008, as a progressive, socially sustainable and luxury womens wear brand. Though the design is fashion forward, the pieces are high quality and long lasting, so contribute to the slow fashion movement.

Ethical and socially responsible sourcing is part of the sustainability ethos but they look for ways to improve every part of the business such as energy saving and waste reduction.

The key brand values are responsibility, quality, honesty and progression. Reiterating what was said by Abi Rushton, there was an emphasis on open transparency and accountability.

The claims they make to sustainability are substantiated by the fact they have enlisted a social responsibility consultant to help build in a strategy to monitor their progression and stay true to the core values. Also through the Ethical Fashion Forum they are developing a sustainability policy. This document will detail how the business is ethical and sustainable, will prioritise their key issues and will build and integrate this into the brand ethos. They are beginning to construct a code of conduct, ensuring ethical and animal welfare credentials, and to trace back the source of their materials to ensure they know exactly where their fabrics are from.

Currently they use materials including organic cotton, merino wool, bamboo and chrome free leather. In their latest collection 74.9% of materials used were from sustainable sources. Part of their strategy is setting targets to improve their credentials and to increase this percentage. Challenges they have experienced include finding materials of a high enough quality. Often fairtrade or organic materials cost a premium, even if they are poor quality. As a luxury label they know that their consumers will not pay a top price for poor quality materials.

It is also difficult for them as a small supplier to make minimums, they can't order larger quantities. As a result they have started building relationships with smaller companies, the hope being that as they grow, and need larger orders, their suppliers can also grow.

The final message was that strategy, policy, responsible sourcing and progression all build strength and resilience into the business.

Kirsten Samuel – MUMO

MUMO sources ethical fabrics for fashion, interiors, designers and businesses, large and small. 2 years ago the company was set up as a design label, sourcing fashion from Brazil and implementing sustainability along the supply chain. However it soon became clear that the real demand was for the materials themselves, ethical or environmental materials and fabrics, with responsible supply chains that are fully accounted for.

MUMO takes a holistic approach, looking to the bottom line problems of poverty and inequalities in the supply chain and working towards an ethical and fully sustainable supply chain, that combines social, environmental and economic considerations.

There is a clear need to change the way established brands work and to get permanent change, the mainstream big businesses and big brands need to be more engaged. But there is the problem of small brands that want to be sustainable that are not able to find agents or distributors willing to work with them due to their size.

MUMO positions itself as a platform for designers and businesses to source ethically, in effect the process of checking and monitoring the supply chain is subcontracted to MUMO. The time consuming process of sourcing the materials and checking their credentials is taken out of the designers hands, as MUMO acts as the middleman and can guarantee the ethics of the supply chain.

Currently the goal is to have a completely transparent supply chain for every supplier, this includes a wide range of materials such as cotton, wool, latex, fish leather and recycled PET. This will mean the fabrics can be traced from the end consumer right back to the original source where they were made. This is being fully implemented in the next 6 months.

Along with traceability, product integrity is very important. As a designer you need to tell the consumer what you are doing, why is it sustainable, tell the story behind the product and build a level of trust.

Kirsten's advice – keep an open mind, stay true to your values and vision, and set targets for the future. Poverty reduction is the key driving force of MUMO and it is possible for everyone involved in fashion to make a difference in this way.

Jackie Andrews – Consultant, luxury fashion

Having worked as a buying consultant to high level designer brands including Stella McCartney, the Gucci Group and Lanvin, Jackie brings a viewpoint from the corporate luxury sector.

Her most recent work with Stella McCartney began to put sustainability into practice through Stella's vegetarian and organic collections. From this she wanted to implement a more sustainable ethos into the whole Gucci Group, however this is easier said than done, as there are always conflicting interests within a large commercial business.

The global crisis has led to reduced sales and profits across the board, retailers and suppliers are feeling the crunch. Delocalisation is sometimes not the answer – if a luxury Italian brand started sourcing organic textiles from India, when local Italian mills are going out of business, it is difficult to justify. Downscaling can lead to making use of that which is local and close, and supporting these suppliers. We are all global consumers, we consume in a way which is incredibly wasteful, but people in developing countries have little waste as they are so efficient with what they have, they recycle and reuse. All businesses can and should be taking small steps which can reduce pollution, increase energy efficiency, looking at paper use, packaging, inks used etc.

It's important to follow innovation, 'natural' is not always more ethical or environmentally friendly. We also have to accept that innovative materials or methods of production will not be cheap.

In terms of Fairtrade, the certification itself is not everything. People making fabric often make a mark-up of only 7%, which compared to retail mark-ups is extremely small. But to achieve Fairtrade status is very expensive and often out of reach of some producers. Check for yourself, visit the producers and see if you can work with them to improve conditions and trade fairly.

Jackie's final message was to encourage us to buy and produce with a conscience.

Ben Ramsden – Zameen & Pants to Poverty

Zameen, meaning 'land' in Hindi, is a new organisation leading on from the work of Pants to Poverty. The history of cotton as a crop and material shows it to be a revolutionary fibre. It is a story of growth, trade and social history, which spans the globe. It is a fundamental crop and fibre for human beings. But there are huge challenges to growing cotton – environmental, social and economic, it is an incredibly complex supply chain from the crop to the garment. The goal of Pants to Poverty and

Zameen is to rid the world of bad cotton, not just reducing poverty but eradicating it.

Zameen works with tribal cotton farmers in India. Statistics show huge numbers of farmers in India commit suicide every year, unable to cope with the unbearable stresses of unfair trading systems.

Taking out the middle man, paying a fair price and giving farmers control can have huge social consequences. Fairtrade and organic are good, but they can go further.

Zameen enables and empowers farmers, giving them control and ownership of the brand. They also aim to completely remove child labour from cotton farming and processing. The profits from Pants to Poverty are currently funding a seed programme to ensure child labour free cotton.

Currently there are nearly 7000 cotton farmers converting to organic, which results in 1500 tonnes of cotton, which has proved difficult to get to market.

This is where a partnership with Alok, the second largest textile mill in Asia, comes in. By involving this mill the cotton can be produced for the mass market. They work differently from other mills whereby instead of adding a fair trade premium at every stage of the production which leads to an inflated price, the mark-up is only added to the final material, making the prices much more accessible to the mass market.

Zameen UK is the communications and PR element of the organisation, for building links between the people who buy into the products and getting to know the people who make it. The emphasis is on community, on a local and global scale. Building social networks can enable better communications along the whole supply chain, from the farmer to the consumer. Zameen can facilitate and support visits to factories in India, so the production is fully understood and people can get to know the workers. Currently the full range of Alok materials include Fairtrade and organic cotton, bamboo and PET, which are available in small minimums. Just by buying you can support and create change.

Questions

Jasmine – Technical Manager

Question aimed to Abi Rushton: Much of the stress and challenge for suppliers is meeting the high demand for ever increasing lead-times. Are Tesco doing anything to resolve this, or networking with competitors to reach some sort of collective solution?

Abi – As Tesco's annual ETI report shows it has increased the length of it's lead times, and they are trying to improve their knowledge of their suppliers capabilities. Tesco buy finished garments, not the raw textiles,

but they are trying to improve the relationship and communications between mills and constantly reviewing the critical path to understand what is realistically achievable for suppliers along the whole supply chain.

Jackie – It's not just buyers who are at fault for short lead times. In large businesses it can be difficult to confront the merchandise team about lead times, and if designers make last minute changes to collections that will increase pressure on suppliers, as delivery dates will not be changed accordingly. What can make a huge difference to suppliers, especially those in small communities, is the commitment and guarantee of the order and a pre-payment of up to 50% upfront. In the short term this is a risk, but in the longer term it builds stronger relationships. And consider – although this is a risk for you, for small communities they often invest everything they have in buying fabrics and components, so upfront payments shows good will, means the workers have something to live on, and can help to ensure delivery.

Clare – Transparency helps to ensure that lead times are controlled along the whole chain.

Angelica – Representative of **Kibo Trade**, an organic cotton factory in Tanzania

Much of the discussion around organic cotton has focussed on India – but has anyone on the panel looked to Africa?

Ben – Currently there is a focus in India, due to a more established infrastructure and the existing organisations are relatively strong. But there is a huge potential for projects in Africa, and an aim is that by developing a framework in India it can then be applied in other countries.

Clare – A problem with sourcing in Africa is getting hold of smaller quantities for buyers from small companies, but this is likely to improve if Africa's infrastructure improves. Which links in to a project currently being run by the EFF.

Tamsin – Africa Inspires is an ITC project, which links community producers with designers and businesses in Europe. The aims being to build capacity, improve infrastructure and have agents in place to make materials available to designers, hopefully to smaller designers as well as big brands.

Kida – Designer and founder of fashion company that is now 12 years old

As a designer of a small label, which is looking to improve sustainability, it is difficult to balance time spent on design and production of new collections, and that spent on sourcing sustainably. Transparency is difficult, because it's difficult to be sure of the information given by

suppliers and there is mixed information as to whether some fabrics are ethical or not. The business wants to be faithful to the goal of ethical sourcing but how can you be sure of your supply chain?

Kristen – Traceability is very hard if you are sourcing from a variety of suppliers and dealing with a lot of middlemen. It can be extremely time consuming, if not impossible to trace your fabrics back to their origin. Relatively speaking ethical fashion is in its infancy, and not all the intermediaries are involved yet. MUMO acts as an agency that takes the role of providing traceability, so the designer doesn't have to spend time monitoring the supply chain. With a small business, design is important so it is difficult to spare the time on this. This is the benefit of sourcing from a company like MUMO which offers traceability along with the textiles.

Lucy – For a small start-up business it is difficult to take on every aspect of the business at the same time, let alone having the extra task of ensuring sustainability and traceability. Time and financial constraints are inhibiting to backing up your ethical claims, so to find a supplier which does this extra service for you is rare.

Kirsten – It makes more sense for a few people to offer this service to many, rather than everyone trying to trace their supply chains.

Abi – There are a growing number of tools you can use to access the environmental impact of fibres and fabrics. Ecometrics is a traffic light system which gives an environmental rating of the materials you are buying. It has an environmental rather than ethical perspective, but it is an affordable tool.

Jocelyn – Loop Fabrics and Element 23, an ethical fashion agency

Comment: There are a lot of people trying to set up some kind of infrastructure, but there are no guidelines as to what is 'ethical'. What is desperately needed is input from government.

Kirsten – Even if projects or businesses succeed in getting funding this can only last for a year or two, when it ends what happens then? There should be tax breaks available for businesses trading ethically.

Jackie – A huge range of values are covered under the umbrella term of sustainability. You need to make a choice because you can't address every problem. Make your own personal criteria and decision based upon your own values.