

# HOW TEXTILE BRANDS ARE PUTTING CONSUMER DEMANDS INTO ACTION

CONVERGING CONSUMER DEMAND AND BRAND LEADERSHIP DRIVE SUSTAINABILITY



## BY MEREDITH MERRITT

There's plenty of research that highlights changing consumer preferences and the increased demand for sustainable apparel. Given a choice between a sustainable product or service and a less sustainable product of similar quality and price, consumers choose sustainable by a large margin,<sup>1</sup> and consumers are willing to put their money where their mouths are: fifty-six percent of consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable products,<sup>2</sup> with 33 percent actually choosing to make the commitment with their wallets by buying brands they believe are doing social or environmental good.<sup>3</sup> The truth is, the underlying statistics behind these numbers are significant, and a fundamental shift is occurring across multiple sectors where consumers are asking more from brands, and, in many cases, the industry is realigning its practices to meet these changing preferences.

After cost, quality, style and performance, consumers are looking for sustainability, verifiable claims, traceability and transparency; and, when it comes to their apparel choices, consumers are assuming brands are taking the lead. According to a recent Sourcing Journal article, 57 percent of consumers would blame the apparel industry if it was discovered that the clothes they bought were produced in a non-environmentally friendly way.<sup>4</sup> Luckily, textile brands are also focusing on sustainability, verifiable claims, traceability and transparency as ways to improve and showcase their environmental impact – meaning consumer demand and industry practices are starting to align.



## SUSTAINABILITY

When consumers think of sustainability, they think of something that's going to last, is good for the environment and the people involved with making the product, and is good for themselves. They want to know that their money is going toward the greater good of something and that it's not being wasted.

**Sustainability is becoming “an important new driver” in what consumers choose to buy, according to McKinsey & Company's State of Fashion 2017.**

The retail industry is leading the way by setting bold goals and implementing integrated marketing plans, highlighting their use of sustainable products to align with consumer demand for such information.<sup>5</sup>

## CASE STUDY: SUSTAINABLE BRANDS SELL

Unilever is a consumer goods company, with over 400 brands that share the common vision of making sustainable living commonplace. Of these brands, the ones that have sustainability interwoven in their purpose and on their labels contributed to almost half of the company's global growth in 2015. These brands are also responsible for growing 30 percent faster than the rest of Unilever's companies.<sup>3</sup>

They are showcasing how much and in what ways their products are sustainable, making it easier for consumers to make good purchasing decisions for themselves, their families and the environment.

## VERIFIABLE CLAIMS/ CERTIFICATIONS

Consumers are looking to labels for trusted claims and certifications. Seventy-six percent use independent third-party certification as a way to benchmark a product's social or environmental claims.<sup>6</sup> Brands are turning to certifications like Textile Exchange's Recycled Claim Standard to prove their use of recycled content, whether down, wool or PET bottles. To go the extra mile, in addition to verifying recycled content, Textile Exchange's Global Recycled Standard also includes requirements for environmental, social and chemical aspects of the certified supply chain. One example of a growing environmental problem that these standards can help address is the need to divert textiles from landfills by focusing on ways to recycle and reuse these materials.

Consumers are also realizing that what they wear on their bodies is equally as important as what they put in their bodies, causing the demand for organic textiles to increase.<sup>7</sup> The Organic Content Standard is one way to verify organic claims on textiles. This standard uses a strong chain of custody framework to track organic content through the whole supply chain so that consumers can be confident that the garment contains the specified amount of organic material. Another way to verify organic claims on textiles is to look for the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) logo when buying apparel. GOTS is an in-depth certification that verifies the use of organic content in textiles, while also looking at social, chemical and environmental practices of the supply chain.

Brands are seeing an increase in demand for certifications to back up their environmental and social claims, and this has caused some to stop and explore the risks that are inherent in their supply chains whether they are social, environmental or animal welfare related. Many of the certifications require not only certifying a single manufacturing operation but also tracing and certifying all supply chain locations all the way back to the farm or source. Here, we're seeing a true alignment of brand leadership and consumer demand.



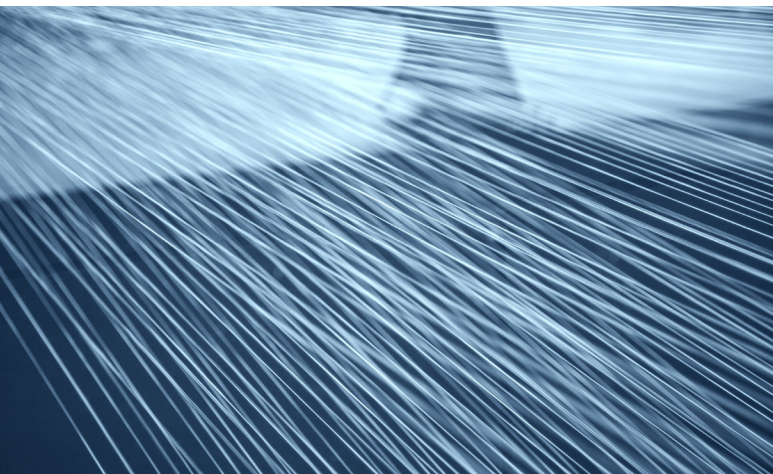
## TRACEABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Traceability is the concept that any product can be traced back through its supply chain to the origins of the components comprising that product; to know where the organic cotton was grown to make a t-shirt or from what sheep yarn for a wool sweater came. Why is this important? Brand reputation risks are often hidden within a supply chain, and consumers are becoming more aware of this by asking questions – and making purchasing decisions. Consumers are wanting to know where the materials of a product came from,

## CASE STUDY: ETHICAL AND ECO-FRIENDLY CLOTHING

The philosophy of Indigenous, an organic and fair trade clothing company, is simple: use ethical production processes, ensure equitable revenue allocation and make environmentally friendly clothing, all while respecting its customers and never making them choose between style and sustainability. It abides by Fair Trade standards to provide fair wages, healthy workplaces and education to the workers throughout its supply chains, and it has used 100 percent certified organic cotton and low impact dyes within the parameters of the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) since its inception.<sup>10</sup>

how the animals were treated and that workers are paid a fair wage and treated well. More companies are publishing the list of their global supplier factories<sup>4</sup> to show full traceability of their products.



These lists are also offering a transparent look into how these brands run their business. Companies are adopting transparency practices that show both the good and the not so good. Consumers might buy a brand because of its catchy marketing or because they believe in its mission, and these elements do build consumer perceptions, but what is behind those brand messages and how transparent the brand is about meeting or falling short of those messages is what will garner praise or punishment from consumers.<sup>11</sup> The heightened use of social media and review sites is also leading to increased brand information to be available<sup>12</sup> whether brands like it or not.

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The shift to sustainable textiles has started, but there's still more to be done by both brands and consumers.

What brands can do:

- > **Be consistent** – Keep marketing messages similar and connected across all outlets (e.g. in-store, online, print ads, billboards, etc.)
- > **Be honest** – Highlight the good, but don't be afraid to call out the bad with a plan to do better.
- > **Communicate achievements** – Consumers are looking for results and updates on progress toward goals, certifications, etc. Communicating impacts and highlighting improvements consumers can see in their daily lives will increase credibility, and help influence consumers' purchasing decisions.<sup>14</sup>

What consumers can do:

- > **Be educated** – Learn about certifications and their requirements, working conditions in clothing manufacturing countries like China and Bangladesh, and processes for making clothing and the water and chemicals used to do so.
- > **Start asking questions** – Ask retailers where their merchandise comes from and whether it is sustainably sourced, certified, etc. If they can't point to any options, ask to speak with a manager to start the conversation that could potentially make its way up the chain of command.
- > **Make good choices** – Consumers have the power to transform the industry to be more sustainable one purchase at a time.

**Consumers have the power to transform the industry to be more sustainable one purchase at a time.**

## CASE STUDY: SUPPLY CHAIN TRANSPARENCY

The Apparel and Footwear Supply Chain Transparency Pledge has been established as a way for companies to commit to and strive for increased transparency into their supply chains. To fully align with the pledge, companies are required to post information on their websites, including the names and addresses of all processing sites, type of products made there and the number of workers at each site. Seventeen companies have committed to full alignment with the pledge by the end of 2017; these include Esprit, Levis, Patagonia, ASOS and Clarks.<sup>14</sup>

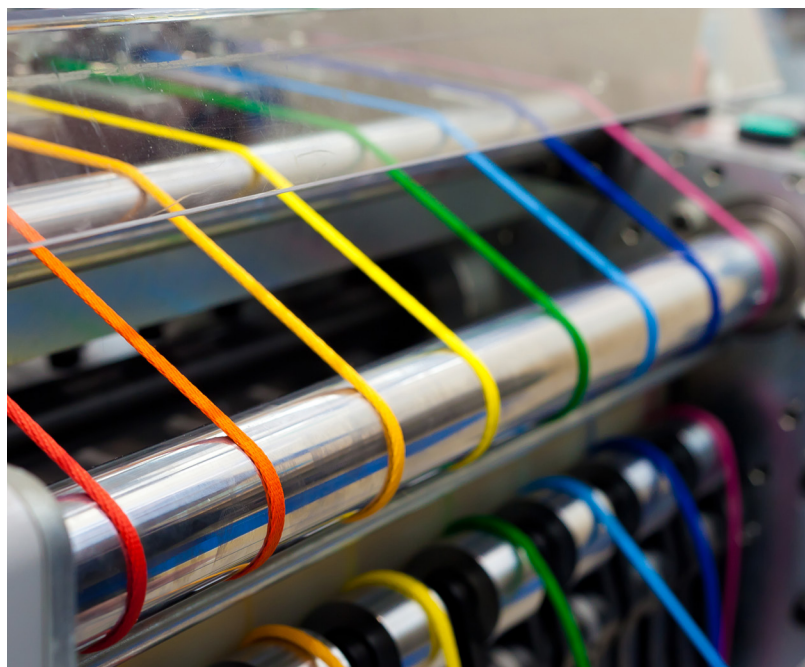


At the end of the day, brands are the ones to implement practices to improve the sustainability, verifiable claims, traceability and transparency of their products. The separate industry and consumer spheres are aligning, so let's continue to work together to keep this shift moving in the right direction and make sure that it never goes out of style.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Meredith Merritt is Sustainability Certification Project Manager at NSF International with an interest in responsible sourcing. Meredith is a graduate of the University of Michigan with a degree in Environmental Policy.*

For more information,  
contact [responsibletextiles@nsf.org](mailto:responsibletextiles@nsf.org).



## REFERENCES

1. <https://www.solarcity.com/sites/default/files/reports/reports-consumer-trends-in-sustainability.pdf>
2. <https://sourcingjournalonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Cotton-Incorporated-Sustainability-Survey.png>
3. <https://www.unilever.com/news/press-releases/2017/report-shows-a-third-of-consumers-prefer-sustainable-brands.html>
4. <https://sourcingjournalonline.com/making-transparency-priority-salfino/>
5. <https://sourcingjournalonline.com/report-retail-sustainability-progress-predictions-cc/>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/sep/10/consumer-behaviour-sustainability-business>
7. <https://sourcingjournalonline.com/us-organic-fiber-textile-sales-hit-record-2016/>
8. <https://indigenous.com/pages/discover-our-philosophy>
9. <https://indigenous.com/pages/discover-ethically-made-fashion>
10. <https://indigenous.com/pages/discover-low-impact-dyes>
11. <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insight-un-global-compact-consumer-study-marketing-mattering>
12. <https://www.solarcity.com/sites/default/files/reports/reports-consumer-trends-in-sustainability.pdf>
13. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting\\_resources/transparency\\_pledge\\_1\\_pager.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/transparency_pledge_1_pager.pdf)
14. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/20/more-brands-should-reveal-where-their-clothes-are-made>

## NSF INTERNATIONAL

789 N. Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48105 USA | [www.nsf.org](http://www.nsf.org)