

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Sustainable production is better for the bottom line: Dana Thomas

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Fashion companies are focusing on environmentally sustainable sourcing. Image credit: Stella McCartney

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK While the fashion industry has a considerable environmental impact, some companies are proving the potential for doing business in a cleaner, more transparent way.

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During a keynote at Initiatives in Art and Culture's Fashion and Design Conference on Nov. 15, journalist and author of "Fashionopolis" **Dana Thomas** laid out the current state of fashion production and the innovators who are seeking to reduce waste and chemical usage. As consumers want to know more about how their fashion is made, brands that operate in a more open manner are positioned to come out ahead.

"Though their efforts are born out of concern for the planet, all of these companies are also proving that sustainable practices are better for the bottom line," Ms. Thomas said. "They are striving to bring sourcing and producing back to a human scale and avoid the troubles that come with a global and opaque supply chain."

Slower fashion

Fashion has a high environmental cost, accounting for one-fifth of all industrial water pollution and 10 percent of carbon emissions.

The way in which consumers purchase fashion has also changed in recent decades, as convenience has made fashion even easier and accessible to acquire. Compared to the 1980s, today shoppers buy five times more garments, averaging about 68 pieces per person per year.

Typically, consumers wear an item seven times before discarding it, and consumers in China average only three wears. Today, Americans dispose of 14 million tons of clothing annually, up from 7 million tons two decades ago.

Consumers in the United Kingdom throw away about 9,500 garments per every five minutes.

Another issue leading to growing garment waste within the fashion business is overproduction. Of the 100 billion garments made each year, 20 percent are never sold and end up being thrown away, shredded or burned.



Vetements took on overproduction through a Harrods window display. Image credit: Harrods

A number of luxury brands came under fire for destroying their unsold goods to prevent off-price or grey market sales.

Last September, British fashion label Burberry announced it would stop the practice of destroying unsold goods as part of its five-year responsibility plan. Instead of burning and destroying old goods, Burberry will now focus on reusing, repairing, donating or recycling these products ([see story](#)).

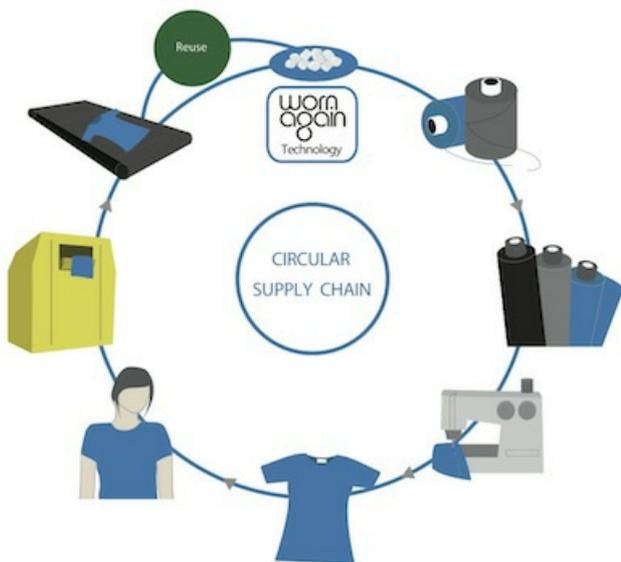
There are a number of companies setting out to change the way that fashion is made and consumed.

An early sustainability advocate in the luxury fashion business, designer Stella McCartney has sought to make high-end apparel less impactful. Along with eschewing animal-derived materials including leather and fur, she has instituted other changes to lessen the ecological cost of her clothing.

Stella McCartney switched from virgin cashmere to regenerated fibers. The brand eliminated petroleum-based PVC from its products, and it also encouraged the rest of its then parent company Kering to do so as well.

The label worked with NGO Canopy to source viscose that is not made of wood pulp derived from ancient forests.

Since synthetic materials such as polyester and neoprene were developed in the 1930s, brands have increasingly used them for designs or incorporated them into blended fabrics. Today, about a third of textiles are cotton-polyester blends.



Worn Again recycles textiles. Image credit: Worn Again

The challenge with hybrid materials for a long time was the inability to separate the natural from the manmade fibers to recycle them. Worn Again, which has partnered with Kering and H&M, has developed a process that can separate and extract fibers so they can be spun into new fabrics ([see story](#)).

Denim is a popular material, but the production of the textile creates significant water waste. Jeans today are put through a process that softens them, compared to the raw denim that was sold years ago.

Jeanologia is using alternative softening methods such as lasers and ozone to bring down water waste.

The indigo used to dye most jeans is also synthetic, made of chemicals including formaldehyde and cyanide.

In Tennessee, Sarah Bellos' Stony Creek Colors is seeking to offer a scalable source of natural dyes, including indigo.

Shifting mindset

As consumer demand for sustainable fashion accelerates, apparel companies are ambitiously planning to significantly ramp up their offerings and transparency in the coming years.

According to a McKinsey study of chief purchasing officers, most executives foresee having half of their products fashioned from sustainable materials by 2025. The industry has a long way to go to reach this scale of sustainable sourcing, and companies will have to surpass hurdles including growing costs and material availability to reach this goal ([see story](#)).

Rather than being a burden, making moves into sustainability can boost a company's business, but getting consumers on board will be key to achieving green goals ([see story](#)). A lot of the impact of fashion comes post purchase, as microfibers are spread into the water and clothing gets added to landfills.

Thinking ahead and focusing on education, Stella McCartney created a video series that delved into caring for clothing in the most eco-friendly way. Tips included washing garments less often and air drying ([see story](#)).

Companies are also embracing the secondhand market, encouraging consumers to buy less but better made fashion.

For instance, Burberry linked with luxury consignment marketplace The RealReal to encourage consumers to extend the lifecycle of their clothing.

Launched on National Consignment Day on Oct. 7, the alliance will give Burberry consumers an incentive to sell their pre-owned garments on The RealReal. This partnership follows a similar collaboration between The RealReal and Stella McCartney, as luxury brands take more responsibility in promoting the circular economy ([see story](#)).

Consumers also hold a lot of potential sway to enact change on a bigger scale.

"We can really get outraged, and we can make noise and hold them accountable with the power of the purse," Ms. Thomas said. "The power of the purse is so much stronger than we realize and we hold the strings to it."