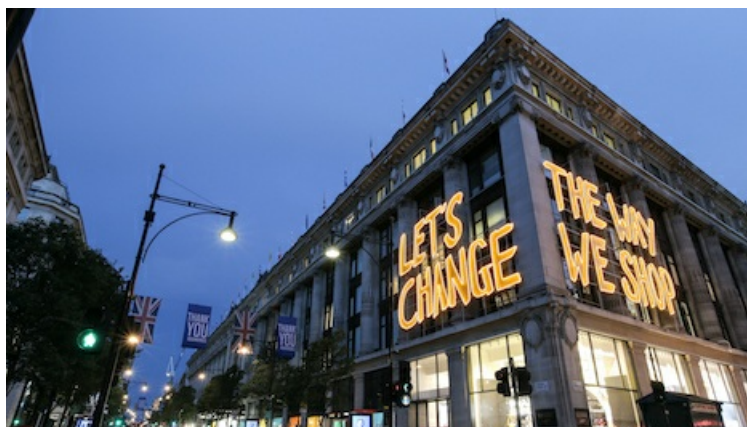


APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Brands must embrace transparency to add credibility to sustainability efforts

November 25, 2020



Selfridges launched its Project Earth initiative this summer. Image courtesy of Selfridges

By NORA HOWE

As the demand for sustainability has accelerated due to the pandemic, luxury companies must look beyond supply chains to make a lasting social and environmental difference.

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During a panel at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on Nov. 24 moderated by *Financial Times* fashion editor Lauren Indvik, industry leaders discussed how the luxury sector's impact on the environment is worsening, despite initial efforts on behalf of companies and their supply chains. Panelists examined what true sustainability looks like and how businesses and consumers can work to achieve it.

"Sustainable means of, relating to or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that resource is not depleted or permanently damaged," said Maxine Bdat, founder of *New Standard Institute*.

Sustainable luxury

The panelists began by discussing how ubiquitous the term "sustainability" has become and how it appears that nearly everything is being marketed as sustainable.

"Sustainability, as a word, is misleading," said Alex Weller, marketing director at *Patagonia*. "It's not particularly informative and it doesn't necessarily hold businesses accountable to the claim.

"The most important language we should be adopting is around responsibility," he said. "Taking responsibility for the entirety of the process of making things, moving them around the world and ultimately selling them."

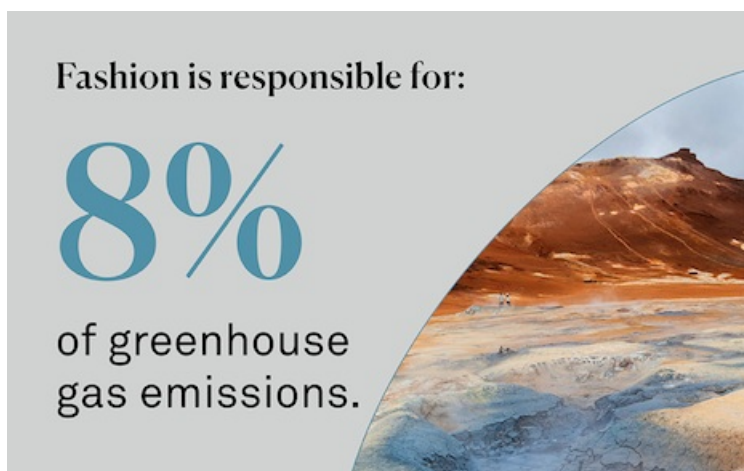


Patagonia pledges to be carbon neutral by 2030. Image credit: Patagonia

Panelists encouraged brands and consumers to move away from the vague language surrounding sustainability and actually investigate how companies are trying to reduce impact and find out where those reductions are happening. Instead of labeling everything as sustainable for the sake of credibility, companies should disclose what they are really doing to drive down emissions, water use, chemistry management and increase the livelihood of communities.

"Our responsibility is to recognize where there are innovations that can be made to move toward regenerative models of business and investing in those technologies," Patagonia's Mr. Weller said. "We must take responsibility for the items we make for their entire lifecycle, regardless of who owns them.

"Once a product is out there in the world, there is a level of shared responsibility between Patagonia and our customer community," he said.



Fashion is responsible for 50 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. Image courtesy of New Standard Institute

Daniella Vega, group director of sustainability at [Selfridges](#), shared the ways in which the company is responding to consumer demand for responsible items.

"We were forced to take a step back and question the models of consumption that are currently in use and assess how to change those models for positive impact," Ms. Vega said. "Through Project Earth, which launched in August, we started doing that."

The consumer-facing initiative approaches sustainability through three lenses: materials, models and mindset ([see story](#)).

Through the materials lens, Selfridges is able to share the material components of a product, such as organic cotton or denim produced with less water. Ms. Vega expressed that customers are open to learning and are receptive to understanding the material composition.

Through the model lens, they are focusing on the consumption of retail and upending the notion of owning fashion by creating resale and rental platforms.

Through the mindset lens, the company discusses issues such as overconsumption and environmental initiatives while amplifying voices in the retail environment.

"Will consumers continue to buy new or will they shift their behaviors completely," Ms. Vega questioned. "That's something retailers need to be mindful of."

"We're not just building models on top of traditional retail models," she said. "We're completely reshaping ones that already existed."



Fashion is responsible for 500,000 tons of micro-plastic pollution. Image courtesy of New Standard Institute

Ms. Bdat stressed the importance of looking beyond recyclable materials and focusing on the production plants and mills, citing that data shows 76 percent of the carbon footprint within a garment's lifecycle is not in the material choice but what processes are being used at the mills.

"Looking towards 2021, we should not be seeking out a magic material because it does not exist," Ms. Bdat said. "However, we can go into our mills and make sure they are energy efficient and are relying on renewable energy."

Brands making a lasting impact

While some brands market the idea of sustainability or sample the movement with capsule collections, others are pushing transparency and have shared concrete change in their supply chains and business structures.

A coalition of 32 fashion companies joined forces to tackle environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity restoration and ocean protection, seeking to scale up their individual efforts with common objectives.

Led by luxury group Kering, under the mandate of France's President Emmanuel Macron, the Fashion Pact launched during the G7 meeting in August 2019. While each of the pact participants has their own environmental initiatives, the project aims to leverage strength in numbers to enact change through the private sector ([see story](#)).

German fashion label Hugo Boss has already made an impressive impact on the environment, but aims to go further in the quest for a fully sustainable world.

The company's public list of goals include, but are not limited to: a 30 percent reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, use of 100 percent sustainably sourced cotton by 2025, use of 100 percent recycled plastic or sustainably sourced material by 2025 and reaching 1,400 children through the Hugo Boss Education Association by 2025.

In accordance with nearly 100 other international companies, Hugo Boss signed the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action in 2018. Through this, the brand is committed to the vision of a climate-neutral fashion industry by 2050 and is contributing towards development goals for clean water and sanitation, responsible consumption and production and climate action ([see story](#)).

"We need to see disclosures from brands from now, not just in 2030, in terms of what is being done to achieve sustainability and how much these brands are on track to achieving their goals," Ms. Bdat said.

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