

SUSTAINABILITY

British luxury brands continue making sustainable strides: Walpole

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Image credit: Burberry

By SARAH RAMIREZ

From circularity to responsible sourcing and equitable workplaces, British luxury labels are accelerating their sustainability work.

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According to [Walpole's 2021 Sustainability Report](#), more than 90 percent of the British luxury trade association's membership considers sustainability to be a top five corporate priority. Brand collaboration has been proving essential, as more than 80 member brands are participating in working groups to discuss research, innovations and more to address challenges including climate change, resource scarcity and human rights risks across the value chain.

"The collaboration between brands, how the brands with bigger resources have shared their learnings with small and medium enterprises, the joint projects across brands who could be considered to be competitors and the ways in which brands have committed to the vision of making British luxury the global benchmark for luxury sustainability has been awe-inspiring," said Helen Brocklebank, CEO of [Walpole](#), London.

Sustainability successes

The luxury sector is worth 48 billion pounds, or about \$66.1 billion at current exchange, to the British economy. With such influence, British luxury brands are taking responsibility by prioritizing sustainability efforts.

It is also increasingly clear that sustainability is a consumer expectation and is now part of the cost of doing business. According to Walpole's research partner McKinsey & Company, 63 percent of consumers consider a brand's action on sustainability to be an important purchasing factor.



A founding signatory of the Sustainability Manifesto, Johnstons of Elgin is committed to sustainability from reducing its environmental footprint to paying all its employees a living wage and offering mental health support. Image credit: Johnstons of Elgin

To help British luxury brands become leaders in sustainability, Walpole launched its Sustainability Manifesto in February 2020 with founding signatories Harrods, Burberry, Mulberry, dunhill, Johnstons of Elgin, The Savoy and Chivas Brothers ([see story](#)). In the year since, more than 70 Walpole members have signed onto the strategy.

The Manifesto has four guiding principles: circular economy innovation, environmental safeguarding, supply chain excellence and workplace equality. Specific aspirations or goals include zero landfill waste, 100 percent energy from renewable sources, 100 percent traceability across the supply and eliminate the median gender pay gap.

"Sustainability is a huge topic and it can be hard to know where to start, which is why the British Luxury Sustainability Manifesto is key," Ms. Brocklebank said. "When we developed it with McKinsey, we were clear we needed to define the priorities for as broad as possible a definition of luxury, which is why we ended up with four very clear pillars of luxury sustainability priorities.

"In addition, the approach we have taken is to bring the British brands together to share best practices and to collaborate on shared challenges in bound packaging in retail, for example," she said. "By working together, a wider swathe of sustainability priorities can be tackled at speed."

Walpole's report also revealed some of the sustainability successes from British luxury.

Packaging and product waste is one area of priority.

From 2021 on, shoe boxes and shopping bags from apparel and accessories house dunhill will be plastic-free, 40 percent post-consumer waste content and 100 percent recyclable. Perfumery Elegantes London recently introduced a bottle with a pump that can be removed to allow refills, moving away from single-use.

Repair and maintenance services have long been part of many luxury brands' offerings, but these are taking on a new form in the digital as a way to extend products' lifecycles.

For instance, London-based startup The Restory has partnered with online retailer Farfetch to provide aftercare and repair services for shoes, bags and other leather goods ([see story](#)).



Online retailer FarFetch has partnered with aftercare platform The Restory. Image courtesy of Farfetch

Meanwhile, leather goods house Mulberry is working to close the loop with expanded offerings, including a new partnership with luxury resale platform Vestiaire Collective and in-house restoration and resale service.

"Mulberry makes its sustainability journey exciting and involving for customers," Ms. Brocklebank said. "The Mulberry Exchange program emphasizes how Mulberry has always restored customers much loved bags at its workshop in Somerset from an archive of leather and hardware pieces going back 35 years, and now you can resell your vintage bag or buy a pre-loved restored one through Mulberrys circular economy initiative."

Among Burberry's achievements, the fashion company is 75 percent of the way towards its goal of 100 percent sustainable cotton by 2022. By next year, the brand also expects to be carbon neutral within its own operations by turning to renewable energy.

Additionally, Burberry is one of the British brands focusing on creating more diverse and inclusive workplaces. The company has adopted the UN Women's Empowerment Principles and formalized diversity targets for hiring and internal successions to address gender and ethnic disparities.

Sharing sustainability strategies

As important as luxury's progress in sustainability is, brands must be transparent and communicate their strategies with consumers.

According to the "State of Lux" report from digital luxury marketing agency VERB, brands should be looking to understand their customers' digital literacy, as well as identifying which values align most with the target consumer. The affluent consumer of tomorrow will want to engage with brands on a deeper level through shared values ([see story](#)).

Walpole's recommendations to engage consumers on issues of sustainability include defining key messages, opting for straightforward content and stay aware of consumer concerns.

"The onus will be on how brands help the customer to understand they're a hugely important part of the luxury sustainability journey, and the way they direct the customer behavior post-purchase," Walpole's Ms. Brocklebank said.