

Textiles Sustainability and Communications

Belinda CARP

Business Consultant
belinda@belinda-carp.com

Position paper

UDC 677:504

DOI: 10.31881/TLR.2020.PP01

Received 3 March 2020; Published 26 March 2020

INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution paved the way for industrialisation, economic growth and innovation, and resulted in the availability of an increased range of goods and services, improved life expectancy, and many other benefits. However, the rapid development has come at a cost which has not yet been settled.

ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

The earth's natural resources are being used at a rate that cannot be sustained by the natural ecosystem and, according to the Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government in 2009, we are heading for a "perfect storm" where a growing world population will demand yet more resources from an earth which simply cannot sustain demand. It is estimated that, between 2009 and 2030:

- global population will have increased by 33%, from 6 bn to 8 bn people;
- demand for food will have increased by 50%;
- demand for energy will have increased by 30%; and
- demand for water will have increased by 30%.

Environmental responsibility is a global issue, and the United Nations (UN) has helpfully identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to guide companies in industries all over the world.

The textile industry – and the fast fashion sector, in particular – is widely believed to be one of the most harmful to the environment. However, there are innovative companies in the industry which have developed technologies, products and services to significantly reduce the industry's impact on the environment. The textile industry has a long and complex supply chain, but environmental and social challenges are being addressed. Some of the SDGs which are of particular concern to the textile industry include:

- Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation;
- Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth;
- Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure;
- Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production;
- Goal 15: Life on Land; and
- Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

Visit any textile trade show around the world, and you will see that the industry is addressing some complex issues, in order to be more environmentally responsible. For example, it is concerned with:

- the environmental impact of fibre production processes;
- fast fashion, consumer behaviour and over-consumption;
- the use of recycling and recyclable materials;
- the principles of a circular economy;
- end-of-life and landfill or incineration;
- biodegradability; and
- durability of clothing.

But change always takes time and requires careful planning. There are small steps which can be taken immediately by individuals in organisations – and huge strides will be made when the necessary legislation is adopted in a consistent and systematic approach throughout the world.

CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

In the meantime, it is equally important to get consumers engaged. Our “throw away” culture is irresponsible and harmful to the environment, and the industry needs to educate consumers about their options, so that they understand and support (even if it means paying extra for!) the initiatives which the industry is developing.

Examples of consumer interests are:

- animal welfare – the development of vegan materials, abolition of mulesing in wool production, and issues around the humane production of goose and duck down for insulation products;
- celebrity designers – endorsements of environmentally responsible products;
- circular economy – reduce, reuse, recycle to minimise waste;
- global warming – reducing the carbon footprint of the textile industry to slow down climate change which threaten areas where consumers live;
- Greenpeace – high profile campaigner draws attention to environmental issues;
- landfill and incineration – what happens to unwanted clothing at end-of-life, the implications of biodegradable materials, and the effects of air pollution on society and human health;
- natural fibres vs man-made fibres – lack of understanding among consumers about the environmental impact of different types of fibres, throughout the product lifecycle;
- online shopping– does convenience take priority over environmental conscience?
- plastics in the ocean – from laundry of clothing made from synthetic fabrics, and the recycling of post-consumer plastic water bottles into polyester fibre;
- recycling and upcycling – post-industrial and post-consumer, including the market for 2nd hand and vintage clothing;
- rental – growth of the sharing economy; and
- traceability – the importance of clear labelling to provide assurance of the safety and sustainability of products and the manufacturing processes used to make them.

CONCLUSION

People are not short of information. We live in an age of “information overload”, and have many different media at our disposal via which we can share and exchange our views with each other. So, clearly, it is not simply a question of conveying information.

The urgent challenge for the textile and clothing industry is to really communicate with consumers, to engage their interest, and to encourage them to become champions of sustainability. And there are multiple incentives:

- 1) to ease pressure on the environment; and
- 2) to improve brand reputation, customer loyalty and employee retention.

When we get textiles sustainability and communications right, everybody wins!