With sustainability featuring so prominently on the list of consumer concerns, retailers have had to move quickly to provide not just reassurance, but also proof, that they are taking the issue seriously. Among apparel retailers, Marks & Spencer has won worldwide plaudits for its approach, Plan A.

Sustainability: Marks & Spencer sticks to Plan A



Plan A has led to Marks & Spencer using 100% recycled plastic in its carrier bags.

Marks & Spencer

Mike Barry is a naturally modest person. He insists that Nike, Gap, Levis, Tesco, Next, Sainsbury and many other retailers deserve at least as much praised for their work on sustainability as his company, Marks & Spencer (M&S) has received in the last two years. Observers across the industry may not agree.

Ask many of them to point to a success story in sustainability and they will name Mr Barry's company for its Plan A strategy for improving performance in managing its impact on the planet and on the people who inhabit it. Probe only a little further and you find that the architect of the plan, the company's director for corporate social responsibility, the same Mike Barry, comes in for special recognition.

He explains that M&S has been sensitive to the question of consumer trust for almost two decades. Before 1990, there was what he calls "implicit trust" in Marks & Spencer from the buying public, at least in its home market, the UK. However, a series of confidence-sapping food-scares (the retailer relies on food for half its sales) demolished that.

Consumers quickly began to express doubts about the rest of the range. "People thought to themselves, 'If I can't trust the food with which I



A new fleet of trucks is helping Marks & Spencer reduce its carbon emissions.
Marks & Spencer

feed my family, I can't trust the clothing you sell either'," he recalls. "Pressure groups started campaigning and it became clear very quickly that consumers were prepared to trust them, the pressure groups, much more readily than they would trust big business."

Now, he explains, 80% of customers insist that green or ethical issues affect their buying decisions in some way. Some of these consumers do little to alleviate their own concerns, having convinced themselves that there's nothing one person or one family can do to save the world.

At the other extreme, some consumers are indefatigably passionate about this subject and will demand to know, if they don't already, where every fibre and every component come from. They are prepared to abandon their intention to buy a garment, no matter how beautiful or how well it fits, if they cannot have a guarantee that the people who make the buttons, and everyone else involved in its manufacture, make a living wage.

In between, perhaps the largest proportion of the 80% will also take action, but they expect the retailer to make it easy for them do so. "They want us to worry about it," Mr Barry continues. "They want us to sort the problem out. They want us not just to sell them a product, but also a promise that the product ticks all the boxes."

Climate change

Of the main categories retailers have to bear in mind in offering these product-related promises to the consumers of 2008, climate-change is probably the most obvious. But this is a recent development, according to Mike Barry. No one would have imagined, even two years ago, that climate-change would come to matter so much to "people running a shop".

The point is that it's about more than the stores. M&S estimates that the running of its stores—including transportation of goods directly to them from distribution centres—accounts for only 10% of the company's carbon footprint. Across the supply chain, the corporate total, including manufacturing at partner sites around the world and the shipment of goods to the markets where the retailer sells them, is about 6.3 megatonnes of carbon dioxide a year. The company, which is no higher than thirty-fourth in the global retail league table, contributes 1% of the UK's total emissions.

Plan A is all about reducing this. The proposed means for tackling the problem include building emissions-reducing design elements into new stores and into re-fits of existing ones. New trucks that the company is using for distribution now are 20% more efficient than the models they have replaced. And one partner, trail-blazing Sri Lankan swimwear and intimate apparel manufacturer, MAS (no relation), has approached Marks & Spencer with the idea of a new 'green' factory that will, in time, deliver 'green' manufacturing of the the products bearing the retailer's label.

That's for the future. Something that is very much for the here and now, and invites consumers to put their concerns into practice, is a move to reduce wash-temperatures. "This is a big contributor," confirms Mike Barry. "We want people to wash the clothes they buy from us at 30 degrees, wherever possible. So we've begun putting this on our labels."

The new labels leave nothing to chance. They state: 'Think climate—wash at 30 degrees.' Innovations in textiles are helping this initiative, as well as helping the public cut down on ironing.

Waste watching

Waste is another element of the plan and, when you consider that 80% of clothing ends up

in landfill, an area the whole industry needs to tackle in a better way. Packaging is part of the problem too, Mr Barry reminds us ("far too many swing tickets"), and so are carrier bags.

In keeping with most major retailers, M&S offers bags to UK shoppers free of charge at the moment, but points out that, at least, it has started to use 100% recycled plastic. This will continue: thanks to the volume of bags the retailer uses, it's economically worthwhile for its suppliers now to go down the recycling route and re-use old bags rather than watch them go to waste.

The same principle applies to the raw materials that go into M&S products. The company is encouraging its manufacturing partners to join the ranks of textile manufacturers that are making polyester from recycled plastic bottles, for example.

The social side

There are 500,000 suppliers producing food and clothing for Mike Barry's company at the moment and, he insists, consumers want him—as the person in charge of this aspect of the business—to demand social justice from all of them on behalf of the people who work for them and the communities in which they function.

"All of the social issues—fair terms and conditions for workers, and so on—matter too," he says. "It's not just the environment. Consumers expect us to manage all these elements all the time."

He believes there are not many major apparel retailers left—only one or two, and he won't name them—that are still doing no basic compliance monitoring. His is among the companies that want to move way beyond the basics.

Just as Sainsbury has no bananas other than fair-trade bananas, M&S wants all its tea and coffee to meet this same standard. Back in the apparel arena, it has started working with fair-trade cotton, even if it has not yet put any fair-trade garments onto its racks. Fair-trade cotton is in short supply; M&S bought up one-third of the entire world supply in 2006 and was still unable to produce a product line with it. But it's a start, at least.

There is a now a dedicated website to allow and encourage M&S suppliers to share best practice. All the detail they could want on what Plan A is and where it is going appears on the site, but it's mostly about encouraging them to interact with the company and with one another. Mike Barry says of their contributions so far: "Some ideas work, some don't, but at least people are starting to tell us their stories."

Back on the consumer side, it's part of life in the twenty-first century that we are all much more willing to speak out when we see poor practice. This will not change; the public will continue to make its demands clear.



New labels urge consumers to play their part by washing clothes at cooler temperatures.
Marks & Spencer

A few years ago, times were tough for Marks&Spencer. In a bid to revive its fortunes, it spent a huge amount of money on a marketing launch that sought to assure people who wore larger sizes that they were 'normal'. It bombed. The company's chairman at the time, Luc Vandevelde, said on leaving his position in 2004 that M&S had only gone down this path after its most extensive and most expensive ever consumer consultation group exercise.

In all the focus groups and surveys it carried out, the public insisted that it wanted the retailer to show some respect and start treating people like adults, instead of showing them pictures of super-slim models and planting the notion that all they needed to do to look like this was buy the right dress or suit. "We interpreted what people told us in too literal, too linear a way," Mr Vandevelde said.

Mike Barry says M&S has learned a lesson from that experience and is applying it to all parts of its operation, including Plan A. "It's a really important question," he says, "because it's true—the journey the consumer is on is not linear. Sometimes it can go sideways, or even backwards. Consumers have set us a real challenge. They still want the same price-point, the same quality, the same speed to market, while still insisting that we make progress on all the corporate social responsibility issues. We could say to them, 'Well, you can't have it all', but we don't want to say that. We want to embrace the challenge."

That's what Plan A is doing. There isn't a Plan B.