SUSTAINABILITY: ADIDAS'S BETTER PLACE

Adidas used its sponsorship of the London 2012 not just for commercial purposes, but also to maximise sustainability and promote its sustainable product platform, Better Place.

Upping the Games

Building sustainability into processes and products is gaining momentum and interest. Many companies are seeking better ways of working that will be less harmful to the environment, create less waste and promote cleaner practices. At the Innovation for Extremes conference, held at Lancaster University in the UK earlier this year (sponsored by Pertex), Alexis Olans, head of adidas' sustainable product programme, explained that the Olympics... provided an opportunity to improve sustainability in every sport. "London is being called 'the sustainable Games'," she says. "We wanted to make sure everything we brought to the Games – to athletes, volunteers and consumers – had sustainable content in it and was made at the best level we could make it."

All told, 90% of articles that adidas created for the Games were designed and developed with sustainable content: 100% of the clothing for the Olympic Village, 100% of the volunteers' clothing, 100% of the torch product and more than 70% of the athletes' clothing on the field.

As part of Better Place, adidas assembles consumer and market research, looks at what is available in terms of innovation, and investigates manufacturing best practices. It provides guidelines to its business units and is part of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, a group of companies that pool knowledge and work together to define what is meant by sustainability.

"We measure sustainability through resource use, emissions and hazards and risk – how all of these elements apply within our products and at every step within the value chain," explains Ms Olans. "The goal of Better Place is to deliver both the style and performance products with 'authentic' sustainability credentials. There is a lot of focus on testing and proving what we are doing in terms of increasing sustainability."



German swimmer Britta Steffen worked with the adidas team to develop the costume material.
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Rebuilding from scratch

As official sportswear provider of London 2012, adidas wanted to focus on developing fabrics that had never been seen before. The researching and testing phase took place over five years. "One of most extreme environments is the pool," says Ms Olans. "One of the challenges we had with this suite of fabrics was that chlorine is caustic on the material. We had some traditional fabrics that had been long-tested and that already worked, but when we set new sustainability targets we had to look at them again. We brought suppliers into our innovation team and set out goals to achieve maximum sustainability content. After several rounds of testing, we wound up with an 82% recycled polyester suit. The remaining element is just the elastane that enables it to stretch."

Ultimately, she says, sustainability becomes an extra attribute. It needs to be built into the design process in the same way as other attributes.

The focus on the basketball court was to develop a material that was as light, as breathable and as strong as possible. "We had given ourselves the target to remake the NBA uniforms," says Ms Olans. "We examined every piece of the material to decide whether or not it needed to be there. This helped us accomplish two goals. One was to use less fabric, which is better for the environment. It also enabled us to get closer to our goal of having a lighter and therefore faster product. It came out as 30% less weight than before.

"In terms of strength, one of challenges was the four-way stretch, as well as having recycled polyester fibres that had a slightly weaker tear resistance. We had to imbue it with enough elastane and reinforcement to give it stretch. We tested different levels of fabric until the numbers worked.

"In terms of breathability, we were able to take learnings from the Olympics and incorporate them into some of our other high-performance products. Before the Games we didn't have a mesh of recycled polyester that would dry fast enough, but we created one that dries two times faster. This was essentially us asking new requirements of our suppliers. Now that we have it, we can spread it into other business units and other sports in the brand."

Positive mental attitude

One of the things the researchers found most interesting was the attitude of the athletes to being involved in trialling the materials. Previously, conversations had revolved around the athletes' physical abilities and demands, but this time they got a perspective on how athletes felt about sustainability in general. "We didn't expect to see such positivity," says Ms Olans. "We were able to go back several times to get additional feedback and there was great enthusiasm. They felt there was an extra level of good in participating, they were happy to be involved and test products."



The Games Maker uniforms were worn by 70,000 volunteers and 6,000 staff and contained 100% sustainable content.

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The target now is to reach 100% sustainability for the next Olympics, which will be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. "There's a reason we hit 70% and not 100% of athletes on field wearing sustainable products: some of our time lines were too far down the line to re-engineer the products, and we don't want that to happen again," she continues. "We want to get to the point where we can say 100% of all product will be sustainable, because of new materials, new construction, less waste and no toxics.

"We got the process started in London and there has been a springing back of all of this learning into the brand and changing how we look at long-term projects. One of the most valuable lessons we learnt was the critical nature of talking about these products from the very beginning of the brief, even if it's five to seven years previous."

Perception is reality

But how concerned are consumers with sustainability? Ms Olans says the younger generation has a different perception of what it means. "They think sustainability should be a given, a product necessity. People want to see a clear, provable explanation of why it is more sustainable and why it is relevant to them."

Building it in at an early stage is vital if companies are to succeed, she says. "We believe the older way of doing business will no longer be profitable in the long run. It is in companies' best interests to change their mindsets now. Even if it incurs extra costs, it is the only way to maintain a healthy business going forward."