BRAND PROFILE: JOJO MAMAN BÉBÉ

We are used to accusations that clothing brands have exaggerated the impact of their environmental strategies; exaggeration is part of the phenomenon known as 'greenwashing'. There is no term for companies keeping successful green practices a secret, which is exactly what babywear and maternity-wear brand JoJo Maman Bébé has done, until now.

The babywear brand that kept mum

Welsh entrepreneur Laura Tenison strikes a contrasting tone to that of many contemporary business people, ones who always have one eye on the stock-market and big themselves up the whole time. She loves her company, specialist clothing retailer JoJo Maman Bébé and she is completely open to the ways of the modern world. Around 60% of her company's sales come from the network of boutique stores she has built up around the United Kingdom (currently adding around 12 outlets in different town centres per year), but the other 40% is coming from online sales and she sees this as an area with great potential for growth.



Polarfleece all-in-one babysuits made from recycled fibres by JoJo Maman Bébé.

JoJo Maman Bébé.

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After keeping its commitment to recycling a secret for years, the company is now talking about it.

JoJo Maman Bébé.

"We don't know how people are finding us online at the moment," she joked in a recent BBC interview, "but the great thing about web retailing is that we can sell to every country. We've got a multi-currency website and we're just starting to market it in selected territories. So it's very exciting. We can test the water to see how the brand works in those countries before putting capital into bricks and mortar. About 6% of turnover goes overseas."

Facebook friends

In reality, she does know how people are finding the website to be able to buy her products, a huge variety of maternity clothing, including swimwear, leggings and shorts, plus clothes for babies and small children, including an organic collection (sleepsuits, hats and swaddling robes in 100% organic cotton). She points out that word-of-mouth among contented mothers, particularly on social networking websites, is a powerful driver; she acknowledges the power of being 'liked' on Facebook. And she is immensely optimistic about mobile shopping, m-commerce, in the near future, especially when mobile communications network switch to fourth-generation (4G) standards, giving people instant, high-speed mobile broadband on phones and other devices. "Consumers have become incredibly savvy and social networking and retail are now totally intertwined," she says. "With clothing, it's easier. Once you trust the brand, once you've bought a shirt, once you know the size, you can go back and shop again. Online and in-store sales are growing in unison. The customer wants a multi-channel experience and now they want it on the go. And this, I think, is going to be the huge difference."

Something else she is looking forward to is cloud computing, when we will store almost no personal or corporate information on our own computers or servers. The data, including big files such as the spreadsheets she says all retailers have to spend lots of time poring over, will be stored virtually, allowing companies like JoJo to dispense with most of its 20-server storage capacity and allowing individuals such as Ms Tenison to access, not just email, but any piece of information she needs while visiting a clothing factory in India. She is switched on to the world of today and of tomorrow.

But, as mentioned, she isn't clambering to make analysts from the big banks do their equivalent of 'liking' her brand to help her conquer the stock-market. She doesn't talk up every development at JoJo Maman Bébé like it's the key to world peace. Instead, she has waited years before telling her customers that some of the clothes in her collections are made from recycled fibres. This would have been front-page news for many clothing brands, big and small, but Ms Tenison has just kept quiet about her work in this area. Maybe it's a Welsh thing.

Accidental meeting

In truth, the JoJo idea came from France, where Laura Tenison ran an earlier business. On getting married in 1993, she decided to sell up and return home again to Wales. On her way to a meeting to conclude the sale of the French enterprise she was involved in a serious car accident and broke around 20 bones in different

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We hate landfill

"We are one of the very few companies making gorgeous clothes for babies and kids from 100% recycled fibres. Plastic bottles and junked clothing can be used to create baby and kids' clothes rather than go into landfill. Whilst eco issues have slightly fallen off the agenda in the recession, we at JoJo believe that what we are doing is well worth the investment.

"The collection of styles made from recycled fibres is mostly in our winter stock, shown online from July. The fabric we make is really warm and not suitable for summer use. From July the website and catalogue feature the huge collection of recycled-fibres clothing.

"A lot of people offer organic cotton they fail to point out that organic cotton takes a lot more water to grow than non-organic cotton, which is a double-edged sword since the world is short of water.

"We hate landfill and also support a company called Knowaste, which is developing a process to recycle disposable nappies. Their system is totally brilliant, turning nappies into roof tiles amongst other things."

Laura Tenison, founder and chief executive of JoJo Maman Bébé.



parts of her body. During her weeks in hospital, she befriended a young mother who was also recovering from illness and was having difficulty finding new clothes for her children while confined to hospital; the range on offer by mail order appeared dull and down-market, and from the conversations the two women had about this, JoJo Maman Bébé was born.

As soon as she got out of hospital, but while she was still in a wheelchair with two broken legs and her mouth wired shut, Ms Tenison started a market research project into children's and expectant mothers' clothing, which convinced her that JoJo Maman Bébé could be a success. The company now has nearly 40 stores, including 11 in London, a 20-person design team in a studio (also in London), with its head office in Newport, South Wales; it has 300 employees in total, but its founder still describes it as a small business. As well as being a hands-on leader, she is involved in a series of networks at home and overseas to motivate girls and women to become active in business, and last year won the prestigious Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year award.

Current demand

Its organic collection, and the prominence it receives on the corporate website, demonstrate that JoJo Maman Bébé has its ear to the ground. There is an appetite for organic fibres, but parents also require reassurance that products in the organic range are suitable for coming into contact with babies' sensitive skin from birth. Ms Tenison's company is meeting both demands. The clothing brand's work to satisfy another mood in the wider market, the desire for clothes made from recycled fibres, could and should be up there in lights too. Plenty of other clothing companies shout about their achievements in this field, sometimes with due reason, and sometimes without. Only Laura Tenison will know why she waited until the recent BBC interview to reveal the steps she has taken. Even then, the statement went out on radio to a relatively small audience on a busy Thursday evening, and there was a slight hint of reluctance in her voice.

"I was standing on a ferry going across the bay in Hong Kong," she recounted, "watching the sea of containers heading towards the west, and I was horrified that I was contributing to this mass of product, some of it going ultimately into landfill. I wanted to do something about it, and I started to develop a fabric made from recycled fibres to offset it. For years, we have sold clothes made from recycled fibres, and for years I haven't really told the customers about it because I didn't think the customers would be interested. But now I am going to tell them."



'Rainbow' all-in-one Polarfleece babysuit.
JoJo Maman Bébé.

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