SUSTAINABILITY: CIRCULAR MANUFACTURING



There are exceptions, but most factories around the world are still, in the opinion of Professor Steve Evans, director of research in industrial sustainability at Cambridge University's Institute for Manufacturing, "enormously wasteful". At the same time, he says consumers buying clothes they neither need nor really want are part of a "fast fashion system". All of this is unsustainable, he argues.

Fast fashion will lose in a circular world

Circular manufacturing is going to happen and is going to happen soon, according to supply chain expert Professor Steve Evans of the University of Cambridge. In the world of textiles and apparel, circular manufacturing means a system that retains and continues to use each molecule, fibre or square-metre of fabric for as long as these keep adding value.

He's aware of examples that exist in the outdoor industry already, Patagonia's 'Common Threads' programme being considered the most famous. But he visits large numbers of manufacturing companies across all sectors and says the circular manufacturing "signal" is growing, even it's still small. Almost all factories are still "enormously wasteful", he insists. Supply chain experts are famous for identifying waste and demanding its elimination, like illicit-substance-seeking sniffer dogs in an airport terminal. Professor Evans, who is director of research in industrial sustainability at the university's Institute for Manufacturing, bemoans companies' fixation with low labour costs. "In the UK at least," he says, "labour costs account for only 10% of the total cost of production, whereas materials, energy, water and so on account for 40%. And still management teams keeping putting all their efforts into reducing labour costs."

Deeper understanding

He explains that the manufacturing companies that are implementing circular manufacturing seem to him to have a deeper understanding of their own products than most of their competitors and are now taking that

A Zara pilot store. The clothing retailer is a fast fashion success story, but Professor Steve Evans regards fast fashion as "the most dangerous challenge of our time".

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Professor Steve Evans, leading in-depth discussions on the future of apparel manufacturing at the WFSGI Manufacturers' Forum in December 2015 in Hong Kong.

World Federation of Sporting Goods Industry

knowledge and turning it into value. "The recycling industry loves opacity," he says. "Recycling companies make money because manufacturers have no idea what their waste is worth, and they do know. But the manufacturers can make better use of that waste than the recyclers can if they focus on total value and not total cost, if they are willing to experiment and learn quickly."

Fibres and fabrics will run out

At a consumer level, the current system of buying clothes we never use, or use for only a few weeks, cannot be sustained, the professor argues, not least because if we keep accumulating clothing in the "hedonistic" way of the western world today, it will only be a matter of time before we run out of fibres and fabrics with which to make it all, which would represent what he calls "a stupid end-point". He goes further, referring to fast fashion as "the most dangerous challenge of our time" because consumers are spending money they do not have to "buy into a fast fashion system", building up credit card debt. "We have carried out a lot of analysis on this," he says of his research team at Cambridge; one of the pieces of information this research has gleaned is that the average consumer in the UK has 147 items in his or her wardrobe, "and most just want a bigger wardrobe".

He urges all sports and outdoor brands, and indeed all manufacturers, to find waste and turn it into money. "Companies that lead the way are already generating value, making money, from waste, often with projects that are capital-cheap but take brain-power and confidence," he explains. "And using waste to generate value is a great way to get rich."

Patagonia's proof

His assessment of the 'Common Threads' programme is that it represents proof that Patagonia knows it cannot sustain the old model. 'Common Threads' is a recycling scheme that the outdoor brand launched in 2005, at first for its 100% polyester Capilene baselayer garments, but now including all types of garments. In the first ten years of the programme, customers deposited a collective total of well over 50 tonnes of clothing in special 'Common Threads' bins in Patagonia stores. He also expresses admiration for other Patagonia initiatives such as its commitment to repairing damaged jackets for free and its famous Black Friday 2011 full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* showing a blue Patagonia jacket but urging consumers not to buy it. All are part of a strategy that will generate value for the company, Professor Evans believes, through generating high volumes of positive publicity and love of the brand, not least on social media, rather than merely through repeat sales. (Patagonia founder, Yvon Chouinard, is on the record as saying that the Black Friday 2011 jacket ended up being a bestseller in any case).

H&M, another clothing retail success story, created by demand for fast fashion.

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