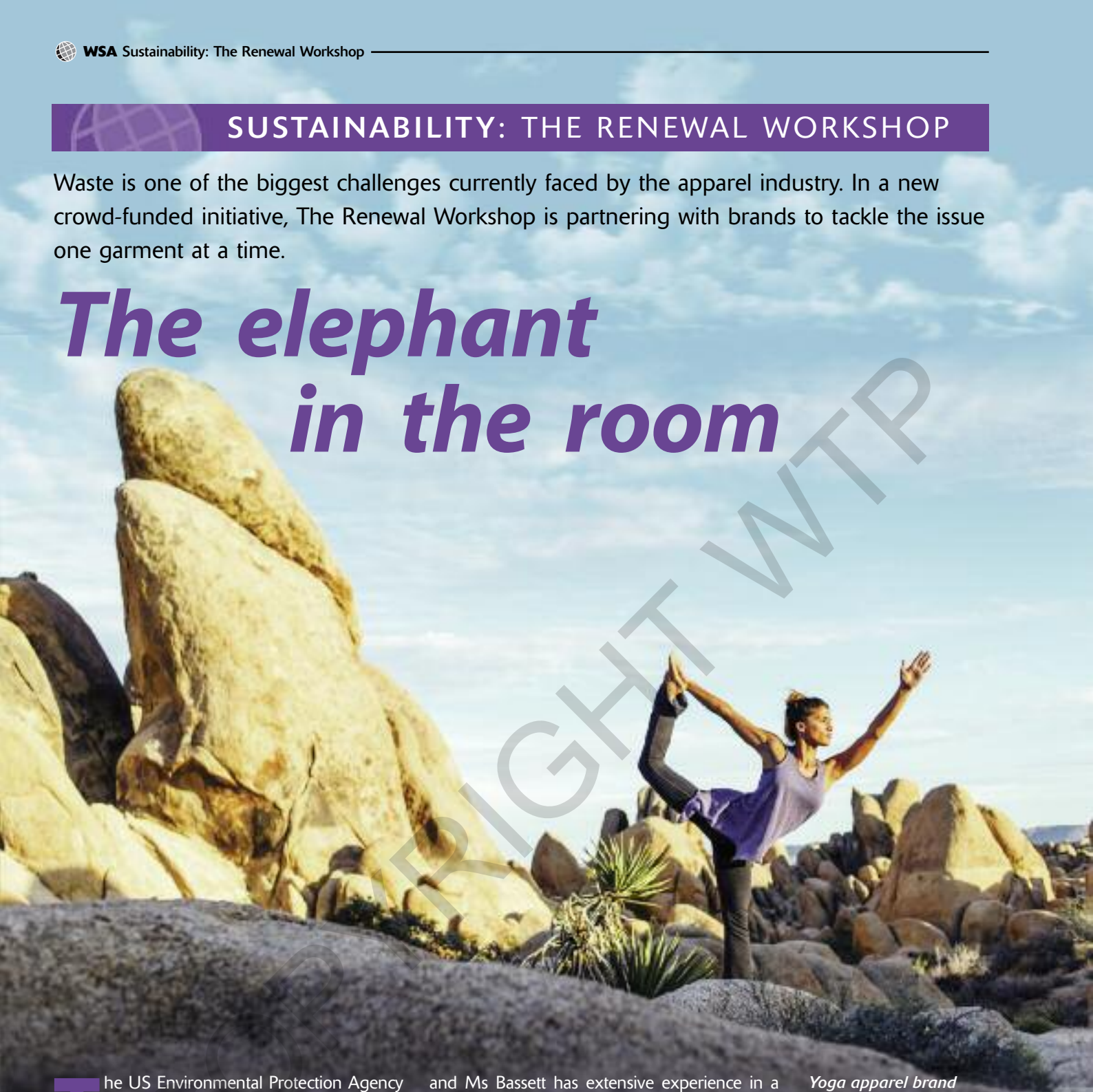
SUSTAINABILITY: THE RENEWAL WORKSHOP

Waste is one of the biggest challenges currently faced by the apparel industry. In a new crowd-funded initiative, The Renewal Workshop is partnering with brands to tackle the issue one garment at a time.

The elephant in the room



Yoga apparel brand prAna is one of five founding brand partners of The Renewal Workshop.

prAna

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that more than 5% of all landfill waste in the country is textiles and that the proportion is increasing. The current levels of waste generated by the apparel industry, primarily due to a lack of alternatives at "end-of-use", means that brands need to accept more responsibility for what happens to their products beyond the point of sale. The Renewal Workshop was founded to provide a long-term, cost-effective solution that allows brands to reduce the textile waste they generate.

Nicole Bassett and Jeff Denby established the initiative after many years of working in the apparel industry. Mr Denby is the co-founder of PACT Apparel, a sustainable clothing company, and Ms Bassett has extensive experience in a variety of sustainability roles. This includes time as Social Responsibility Manager at Patagonia and Director of Sustainability at prAna, positions which gave her insight into the industry as well as a strong reputation among her peers. She turned to Mr Denby in her search for a co-founder due to his experience launching and operating a sustainable business.

During her time at prAna, Ms Bassett says she noticed an increase in concern within the apparel industry about the "end-of-use" of products. She saw that brands were struggling to address the problem due to the linear structure of their businesses. The core operation of an apparel company is to manufacture and sell garments and so returns present a problem

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"Renewed" garments will carry The Renewal Workshop's own branding alongside that of the partner brand.

The Renewal Workshop

because a company has to divert resources (both financial and in terms of labour hours) away from its main revenue generator. She notes that brands' ad-hoc approach to managing unsellable returns (such as donating them to charity or shipping them overseas) has not solved the problem; it has only shifted the burden further down the supply chain.

Positive response

Erin Hoffarth, marketing manager at Mountain Khakis, one of the founding brand partners of the initiative, tells *WSA* that The Renewal Workshop "fills a hole that we've been trying to fill for a long time". Mountain Khakis joined Ibex Outdoor Clothing, Toad & Co, Indigenous Fair Trade Fashion, and prAna on a pilot programme during the first half of 2016.

Indigenous says that it sees the Renewal Workshop as "a way to solve a major problem" in the apparel industry and that it is "thrilled" that it is "tackling the issue head on". It hopes the initiative will help the industry "move closer to a circular economy".

Misti Martin Berry, senior product manager at Ibex, pays tribute to the "energy and momentum" of The Renewal Workshop, which she believes will be crucial in getting brands to take more notice of the problem of textile waste. She says the initiative matches Ibex's "strong belief in sustainability" and gives it a way to extend the lifecycle of its products and to avoid returned items being sent to landfill.

The renewal process

Brand partners send their unsellable garments to The Renewal Workshop's facility in Oregon, US. These items may have been returned by customers due to defects, be the result of excess stock or have been damaged during manufacturing. The initiative will act as a support system for brands that did not previously have the means for dealing with unsellable merchandise. Indigenous tells *WSA* that it does not have the capabilities to carry out the required repair processes in-house and so The Renewal Workshop is an ideal solution. It adds that "the transformation of the clothing we provided (during the pilot programme) proved that their concept and execution work exceptionally well".

Ms Hoffarth of Mountain Khakis says the brand will take advantage of the initiative to recycle items that "still have good life in them". She adds that many of the defects on returned products are easy to fix, such as pulled threads or broken zippers. The Renewal Workshop will prevent such items being discarded. It will allow the company to be "a bit more lenient" on the returns it is willing to accept.

The Renewal Workshop explains that brands send unsorted boxes of garments to its facility. The first step in the process is to clean them, which is done using a Tersus waterless cleaning system from technology developer CO2Nexus. The machine, also used by Patagonia for its own garment repair scheme, uses liquid carbon dioxide as a solvent for cleaning and disinfecting textiles. Items are tagged by brand, size or colour before being sorted into different problem categories depending on the level of work required to restore them. An assessment is made into why they have been deemed unsellable and they are sent to the repair area where trained staff get to work mending the garments in batches. They use bluesign-approved trims, labels and zippers, before adding The Renewal Workshop's own branding to the 'renewed apparel' so that future owners know that it has gone through the refurbishment process. A quality-control process certifies that the renewed product meets the standards of the brand that manufactured it.

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The Renewal Workshop's facility in Oregon, US is already up and running and there are plans to scale up operations in the near future.

The Renewal Workshop

Second life

The Renewal Workshop's first intention is always to renew a product so that it can continue to fulfil its original purpose (e.g. repairing a jacket with a small rip or a broken zipper). If an item is too damaged and cannot be repaired it will try to upcycle the material into a different product, for example using the fabric from a damaged jacket to create a tote bag.

Even though recycling is the last resort, The Renewal Workshop has a plan in place for this eventuality. It has formed partnerships with recyclers to guarantee that no textile material will ever end up in landfill. It says a lack of feedstock is inhibiting the development of textile recycling technologies. Pure materials are more easily recyclable but The Renewal Workshop says the industry is a "long way away from really good solutions" for recycling blended materials. It highlights companies, such as London-based Worn Again, that are working on innovations to tackle this problem. Worn Again has developed a chemical technology to separate and recapture raw polyester and cotton from blended textile materials so that it can be reused.

Once the garments have been restored, the brands are given the chance to buy back the items so they can resell them. Many brands lack the sales channels to take up this option and so it is more likely that The Renewal Workshop will sell the items through its own online platform. This would be for between 40% and 60% of their original listed price. The brands receive a portion of the revenue from these sales.

The Renewal Workshop emphasises that buying renewed rather than new products is significantly better for the environment. It says for every nine months of use, doing so reduces CO_2 impact by 27%, water consumption by 33% and waste by 22% compared to buying new. If more consumers bought restored garments, it would have a considerable effect on the volume of textiles that end up in landfill every year, which it says is more than 14 million tonnes in the US alone.

The future

The founding brand partners will play an important role in spreading the Renewal Workshop's message. Ibex says it plans to tell its customers via email that this service is available. This will give them the confidence to return their unwanted or worn garments in the knowledge that they won't end up in a landfill site. The company will also include information about the initiative on its website and is working on including a statement in its shipping paperwork. Mountain Khakis is hoping to include notice of the initiative in its future product guarantees and

Mountain Khakis says The Renewal Workshop solves a problem that it has been trying to address for some time.

Mountain Khakis/ Stephen Matera



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says consumer communication will be crucial to the initiative's success.

Matt Reynolds, president and co-founder of Indigenous, believes that The Renewal Workshop is well placed to take advantage of the "fast-emerging trend" of vintage fashion, which he says is starting to make the jump across the Atlantic from Europe to the US. He says the popularity of sites such as Yerdle and ThredUP, which allow members to sell or exchange used garments, shows the appetite of the US public for second-hand products. He predicts that this market could "dwarf" the fashion industry in the coming years. A recent report from ThredUP said that the online apparel resale market has grown 82% annually in the last three years and is on course to hit $25 billion by 2025.

The Renewal Workshop will be hoping that this growing trend contributes to its own success and allows it to drive real change in the apparel industry. It will launch its online sales platform in the coming months, having already sought investment via international crowdfunding site Indiegogo. There are also plans to scale up factory capacity, which will see its current workforce of five people increase to 30.

Convincing the most recognisable apparel brands to get on board will be key to the success of the initiative but The Renewal Workshop is confident that brands will be eager to be involved when they see data regarding the reclaimable value of their products. This will be presented to them after the completion of a pilot project, the first stage of the partnership process. If The Renewal Workshop can acquire big-name partners, it will be a step closer to achieving its long-term goal of making "the entire apparel industry circular".



Co-founders Nicole Bassett and Jeff Denby have made use of their experience working in the apparel industry to get the initiative off to a good start.

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