RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: FINCH DESIGNS AND REPREVE

Finch Designs recently became the first China-based company to receive the Project Just 'Seal of Approval' for its commitment to sustainability and transparency. All its swimwear is made using Repreve recycled fibres from Unifi.

The bigger picture

Itee Soni and Heather Kaye, founders of swimwear brand Finch Designs, have a combined 25 years of experience in apparel design and manufacturing. Ms Soni designed for brands including Paul Smith, Ted Baker and Karen Millen before moving to China in 2007. She specialises in designing womenswear and is responsible for all of Finch's signature prints. Her partner in this venture, Ms Kaye, relocated to Shanghai in 2006 with the Kate Spade handbag brand. As well as her own experience in designing womenswear, she has a strong background in textile sourcing and production and garment manufacturing.

They founded Finch in 2010, choosing to base it in Shanghai. Products are manufactured in China before being sold across the world at luxury resorts and spas, the majority of which are in Asia and the Middle East. The brand's range of swimwear for men, women and children is also sold at private design events and online.

Valued partner

Ms Soni and Ms Kaye have made sustainability a central pillar of their brand. They consider themselves to be disciples of the 'slow fashion' movement, repeating 85% of prints and styles year after year to encourage Finch customers to be more responsible in their purchasing habits. The founders say having designs that are "never out of season" means customers don't feel pressured into buying new products simply to keep up with the latest trends.

Finch's products are designed to last; it expects each item of swimwear to be worn a minimum of 200 times, which should allow for "10+ years of high quality life per swimsuit", according to Ms



The brand's founders believe they have the opportunity to transform the swimwear industry through the use of recycled PET.

Finch Designs

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Finch's material of choice is Unifi's Repreve recycled fibre. Derived from plastic bottles, it goes through a variety of steps before it is ready to be used in one of the brand's swimsuits.

Finch Designs

Kaye. She says an "extremely tight supply chain" is crucial to the success of its manufacturing operations in China, which helps to ensure customers receive a well-made swimsuit that doesn't need replacing after just a few years due to the colour fading or a loss of elasticity.

In its pursuit of a more sustainable business, the company has done away with non-renewable packaging at the resorts where its products are sold, instead offering each customer a reusable, waterproof bag made from recycled material.

The material in question is Unifi's Repreve fibre, which will be familiar to readers of *WSA*. It is derived from recycled PET from plastic bottles and has been used in an array of products including outdoor wear, football jerseys, socks, caps, airbeds and car seat covers. Finch started using Repreve in 2013. Its knit fabric contains 87% Repreve and 13% spandex from Creora, while its woven fabric is 100% Repreve. One of its swimsuits can use up to the equivalent of 15 plastic bottles.

Ms Kaye states that Finch saw an opportunity to transform the swimwear sector by using recycled PET. It worked closely with Unifi for around 12 months to develop the fabrics it now uses. The fibres are sourced from Unifi's office in China before being sent to Chinese mills to be woven or knitted into fabric.

"When we began, we were looking for a supplier that understood our mandate of providing a transparent supply chain to our customers," she explains. "We found that commitment in our collaboration with Unifi; through the use of Repreve, they were able to help us create a high-quality product for the good of our consumers and the environment."

Another factor that appealed to Finch was the fact that Repreve fibres are fully traceable as a result of Unifi's 'U Trust' verification programme. A trace element, a proprietary 'signature' imprinted in each fibre allows Repreve to be identified and traced even after it has been incorporated into a fabric or product. This means the brands using it can provide evidence to support their claims about recycled content.

Regional representative

Finch's commitment to sustainability and transparency was recognised in August 2017 when it became the first company based in China to be awarded the 'Seal of Approval' from Project Just. It was one of just three brands in the swimwear category to be granted it, from a total of 117 nominees.

Project Just was launched in 2015 with the aim of helping consumers make informed choices when purchasing fashion products. Its ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of a more transparent and sustainable fashion industry. The 'Seal of Approval' serves as an important weapon in Project Just's quest to achieve this. It is only granted after an extensive and in-depth examination of a company's environmental and social practices. Among the areas it delves deeply into are labour conditions, traceability and community efforts. As is the case for all companies wishing to be considered, Finch had to submit detailed information and documentation to demonstrate that all aspects of its business are true to the principles of sustainability.

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Ms Kaye says she is "ecstatic" with the recognition from Project Just, explaining that it represents "an incredible opportunity" to educate customers about how they can contribute to environmental and social responsibility through their purchases. She adds that the 'Seal of Approval' will motivate the company to "keep scouring every aspect of our supply chain".

The brand insists on going beyond what is mandated by law in China in terms of workers' rights and conditions. Ms Kaye admits the company's hands "are a bit tied with regards to workers' hours and labour organising", but says the owners and bosses of its suppliers are willing to listen to "constructive feedback". It vets all suppliers very carefully, according to Ms Kaye. This includes visiting them on a frequent basis, which she insists is the most effective way to guarantee they are "upstanding and trustworthy".

Regular dialogue with suppliers ensures Finch's lead-times are realistic, preventing any unnecessary strain on the workforces of the factories where its products are made. The fact that Finch is a non-seasonal brand is of help here as it means it can work with suppliers during their less busy periods.

Ms Kaye believes every company that



PET flake produced by the Repreve bottle processing centre.

Repreve

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manufactures or sources products in China has a responsibility to improve the conditions for workers in the country. She hopes Finch's recognition will inspire other companies based in China to submit themselves for assessment by Project Just.

Point to prove

Finch wants to go a step further than simply using recycled materials; it is exploring how it could take back post-use swimwear at the end of its life and turn it into new products. Ms Kaye believes it won't be long until the fashion industry makes the transition to a closed-loop manufacturing cycle. "A sea change is coming," she predicts. With this in mind, the brand aims to have a circular, closed-loop supply chain of its own by 2020.

Another of its medium-term goals is to grow to a size that will allow it to hire a third-party expert to report on water and energy usage and carbon dioxide emissions throughout its supply chain. It would make this data freely available to the public as a sign of its commitment to transparency.

Finch's ambition is broader than its own financial success. "Our dream is to build a truly sustainable company – for our planet, our supply chain partners, ourselves, our employees and our stakeholders," Ms Kaye says. "We're definitely out to prove that a profitable business does not have to come at a high cost to the planet's resources or to workers at our partner factories."



Finch sells swimwear in a range of styles and prints for men, women and children.

Finch Designs

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