GAME CHANGERS: MICHEL CHTEPA

Catalyst for change

Spanish company Seaqual 4U, launched in 2016 by European textile players Antex and Textil Santanderina based on an initiative by the Ecoalf Foundation, cares about more than just selling its Seaqual recycled polyester fibre to brands and retailers. Derived from upcycled plastic marine waste, this fibre is just one part of its mission to help clean up the planet's waterways. The company appointed former Invista marketing manager Michel Chtepa as managing director in September 2017 as it seeks to inspire the textile industry to change the way it thinks about waste.

What is your background in the textile industry?

I started in the textile industry in 1990, mainly in fabrics for the apparel and fashion business. My main background is in managing different fabric producers and I have covered nearly all of the main market segments, including fashion, denim, swimwear, home textiles and some protective garments. I have worked for several fibre producers in a marketing capacity, including Lenzing, Toray and Invista.

What attracted you to Seaqual 4U?

I knew one of the shareholders and founders, [Spanish spinner] Antex. They had an initial project with [textile manufacturer] Textil Santanderina and Ecoalf and asked me to join to reframe the vision and redevelop the business model. What I liked was the spirit of a bigger kind of start-up with a strong sustainable commitment. The story attracted me very



Michel Chtepa says Seaqual 4U has made progress in nearly all segments of the textile industry over the past 12 months. Its next target is to gain recognition for its fibre from consumers.

Seaqual 4U

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Seaqual 4U says more than eight million tonnes of garbage reach the sea or ocean every year; only 10% of this is plastic.

Seaqual 4U

strongly. The partners we are working with, such as Textil Santanderina and Antex, are very well-established players in the textile industry. The adventure attracted me because of the story by itself as well as the human story.

How have the first nine months in the role been? Have you achieved everything you wanted to achieve in that time?

Yes. It's a long journey; sustainability is a huge topic. This is especially the case for Seaqual, which is not only about recycling, but also about cleaning the sea. It's about transforming trash into an opportunity. The major challenge has been to refresh and reframe the vision, and at the same time to create the first step of a strategy to communicate and engage with the textile industry on a business-to-business level. I think we have had a good year in terms of communication and raising awareness across the textile industry. We are in touch with nearly all the segments, including automotive, fashion and denim, and big brands and fabric processors are in communication with us. Now we are starting to work on the business-to-consumer level. Over the next six months we will start to develop a platform in order to inspire consumers.

Do you think there is a need for the consumer to know more about recycled materials and about ocean/sea waste?

For me, there are two needs. First of all, everybody talks about pollution and everybody seems to be concerned, but nobody does anything until there is an economic benefit. If we don't incentivise the market, if we don't inspire the consumer, the market will not move. So, we have to demonstrate to the industry that there is a need in the market and that the consumer wants recycled materials. We need to show that there is a sort of wave coming.

The other point I feel is very important is that there is lots of talk of sustainability. Anyone can claim they are sustainable, but what does it really mean? We didn't start Seaqual for marketing reasons. We really want to commit ourselves for the long term. We believe we need to educate consumers; otherwise, it will remain just a business. If it is just a few brands which take the material to go along with the trend of using recycled material, it will not go too far. We need to commit in the long term to really become experts so that we can do things with a purpose.

There are a few groups using recovered ocean waste to make textile materials; is there something which differentiates Seaqual 4U from these companies?

First of all, we are not cleaning just to recycle, we are cleaning to really clean the seas. In Spain, which was the starting point for the company, we were able to collect waste from the seabed. We don't just collect the plastic, we collect all of the trash. This makes a big difference. Plastic is only 10% of the pollution [in the seas]. All the trash is interacting with the environment, poisoning it and creating pollution. It is about really cleaning, rather than just selling recycled material.

The second difference is the way we have designed the economic model of Seaqual. We consider the recycled textiles as just a starting point for the project because the founders are textile players. They were mainly using PET, which is why we started with PET and why we

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Spanish textile manufacturer Textil Santanderina is one of Seaqual 4U's main partners. It turns the Seaqual fibres into material that can be used in a range of markets, including apparel.

Seaqual 4U

started with fibre and then yarn. But our objective goes beyond this. Our main objective is also to clean and to create value from trash. In the future, we will look to clean and recycle other plastics, such as PP or nylon. We want to cover all the textile segments. We already have partners starting to develop products using Seaqual yarn from nearly all of these segments.

We want Seaqual to be a catalyst. To be a catalyst, we need to secure capacity. We also need to consider the dynamics of each segment because the fashion industry does not have the same incentives as the denim or automotive industries, for example. Each segment needs specific R&D to fit the market dynamic. If we don't provide the right tool box in terms of product to the players in the value chain, they will not know what to develop. A knowledge-led approach makes a big difference.

Is building consumer awareness about Seaqual also an objective?

We want to be recognised by the consumer, not just because of a brand but because of our commitment and trustability. For example, we ask any brand using Seaqual-certified fabrics to identify on the garment that this is what is used. We need to create an emotional link between consumers and the Seaqual brand in order to push the industries using plastics to make positive changes.

There is a big conversation at the moment about collecting waste from the seas and oceans; is this a viable solution to the problem?

Collection is just a starting point and is only one part of the solution to the problem. It should not be the only solution. We need to consider microplastics as well as plastics. Sometimes, plastic in the water degrades before it can be collected. If we collect it in time, we can stop the degradation. Microplastic is already the major issue. If we want to claim to do something good, we should not stop at cleaning. We should also work on projects that fight against the release of microplastics.

At Seaqual, we are aiming to collaborate with brands to push them to design to recycle. The main solution would be for brands and consumers to upcycle themselves. By doing this, plastic could become a more environmentally-friendly material. Textiles are a good market for recyled PET bottles; even though the viscosity reduces during recycling, it is still enough for textile processing requirements. By reprocessing a PET bottle, you can reduce water use by 20%, energy use by 40% and CO_2 emissions by 50%.

Has Seaqual 4U set any targets for how much waste it wants to collect or how much recycled material it wants to produce?

It is too early to set targets. The project has only been running for 18 months and we still have a long road ahead. Our objective is to have sourcing platforms worldwide to 'act local' where waste will be collected, recycled, reprocessed and resold. I think there is no limit to what Seaqual can do. The model is not fixed; it will be re-evaluated in order to better fight against pollution and to transform one man's trash into another man's treasure.

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