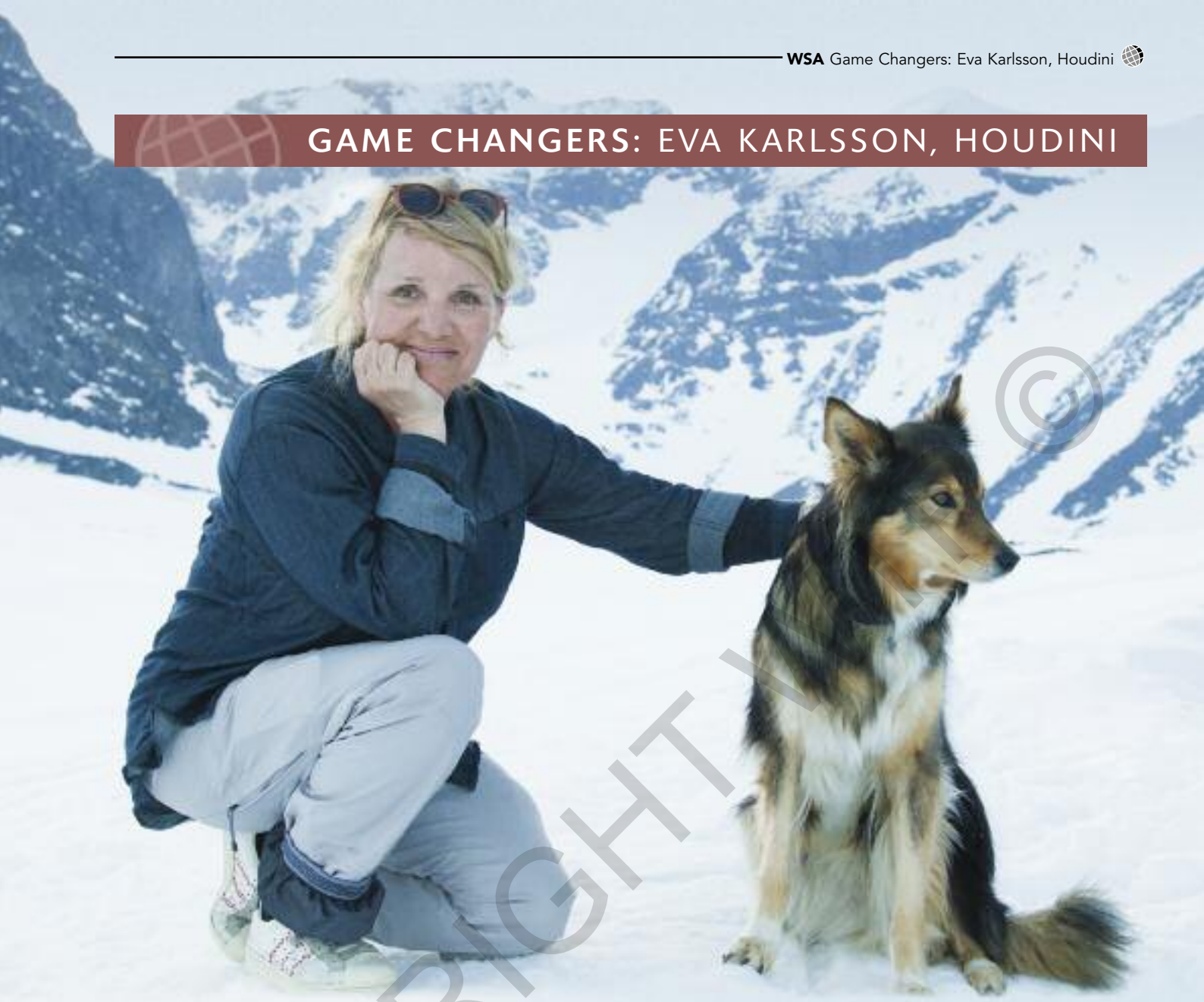
GAME CHANGERS: EVA KARLSSON, HOUDINI



Houdini's circular pledge is no illusion

Eva Karlsson, CEO of outdoor brand Houdini, is confident that big, positive changes are around the corner in the apparel industry. As well as showing an eye for innovative ideas and technologies – ranging from rental services to solutions to the problem of microfibre pollution – her company has demonstrated a commitment to sharing its knowledge and experience for the good of the industry and of the planet.

What is your background in the outdoor industry?

I have been working in the outdoor industry throughout my career. I got into it because of my passion for outdoor sports and the traditional Scandinavian way of interacting with nature in a very relaxed and uncomplicated way. This was my childhood and is now my adult life. Outdoor sports are a passion and I like to work with things that I am passionate about.

How did you come to work at Houdini?

A friend of mine, who I met most of the time in the mountains or skiing, designed a new type of product that was super-innovative at the time. This was in the late 1980s. It turned into a company. She was doing it alone, but she was more of a skier and a mountain climber than a business person. I was in the industry and I took

Ms Karlsson's role at Houdini allows her to be closely involved in two things she is very passionate about: outdoor sports and protecting nature.

Fredrik Schenholm

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on the challenge of building the brand not from scratch, but from a very small base. We were a small collective at the time, just three people, but 25 years later it looks a little different. We still work in the same way, as more of a collective than a corporate organisation.

How would you describe the brand's philosophy?

To us, it was common sense to build a company that emphasises the beauty of nature and how we can contribute to that. Common sense also in taking responsibility for our actions and taking care of the places we love like the glaciers. Social aspects and ethical aspects were also common sense to us. We went from there. Since we were small, we could build the right way from the start. I think that made us different in the way we built our culture. We don't have a corporate culture; we have a people culture. You can have the same ethics and moral compass at home as you do at work. We share some passions and we are quite a diverse team. The common denominator is our values.

Now, we are aiming to become regenerative, which I think also makes us extremely rare in the business world, where everybody is looking at how to reduce their negative impacts. While we are of course extremely focused on reducing our negative impacts, we also focus on our positive contributions and how we can scale those in the future. For example, how can we convert the materials we use into technologies that work in partnership with nature rather than at the expense of nature? This is actually possible and important. What is the purpose of our company if we cannot contribute to good in society and for the planet?

With this in mind, are there any specific considerations that Houdini makes when designing a product?

Circular design is what we have been practising since we started to understand which technologies could work in the circular system we want to create. The best example of a perfectly working circular system is nature, where nothing ever becomes waste, it becomes a resource for something else. That is the type of system we need to create. In line with that, we look at different technologies. It is not only about natural fibres; there can be a circular system within synthetics as well. For example, circular polyester has been around for a while.

What other initiatives has Houdini put in place in its pursuit of a circular system?

Since 2006, we have had a take-back system so that our customers and end-users can bring their worn-out products back to us. We take full responsibility for making sure they become a resource again. We are on track to be completely circular by 2022 in the sense of how we design and how we take care of our products throughout their lifetime, including at end of life.



Polartec Power Air has been proven to reduce microfibre shedding. The company has achieved this by encapsulating lofted fibres within a multilayer, continuous yarn fabric construction during the knitting process. This is also said to improve thermal efficiency.

Chris Low/Polartec

Are there any particular barriers to creating a circular system?

Microplastic pollution is the opposite of circular. There can be nothing that ends up as waste and pollutes another ecosystem. That was a huge challenge. We talked to all our suppliers in 2013 when we released our first sustainability report and we were devastated. It wasn't that we were a big polluter, but we were a small part of the problem and that was enough for us. We just launched a fabric that we worked on with Polartec [Power Air], which is a fleece engineered to trap air without having the loose fibres that can go astray while washing the garment.

Did Houdini work with Polartec from the very start on the development of Power Air?

Yes. We have had a long relationship and partnership with Polartec. Even though we are a relatively small brand and usually have challenging requests, we share a common vision to create good things together. They have a lot of trust in us as a brand when it comes to understanding complex systems and having a feeling for what is really important moving forward. Even though we haven't put the money into the innovation process, I think they appreciate the 'thought leadership' that there has been from our side. This makes them motivated to go full speed ahead with a product like that. I believe Polartec Power Air and another innovation in the same field PrimaLoft Bio (a recycled, biodegradable and recyclable fibre) are going to change the industry, I'm sure of it. I hear now that other forefront synthetic material suppliers are looking into smart engineering and biodegradable polymers.

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Who is driving these innovations; the brands or the ingredient suppliers?
I think it's a collaborative effort, not just between the brands and the ingredient brands but also with the end customers, who have realised that the beautiful garment they bought could be causing a problem for the environment. Questions have arisen from our customers and these are now reaching all brands. Academia are also involved as they understand the basic science that is required. The ingredient brands are so skilled in engineering and technology development and implementation. The brands have a stronger understanding of the end users. In our case, I think we have a very strong understanding of where the world needs to be heading. There is an increased awareness and demand from customers and from society in general.

Do you think consumers around the world share these feelings?
Houdini distributes worldwide and for sure we can see quite big differences between the different countries. But we can also see that there is a 'tribe' of early adopters who are aware, knowledgeable, curious and share a sense of urgency. There is also an increased awareness that there is a way to create a better system and the possibility to create a better world.

How have attitudes towards recycled materials changed in recent years?
We can see for sure that recycled polyester fibres and recycling at the end of life is something that people are at least thinking about. When we started doing it, it was something that we had to explain again and again. We had to try and inspire suppliers to go ahead and try it, but nowadays it is a given. The European Union is working towards a circular consumption model as a whole so there have been dramatic changes. We are so hopeful. To us, who have been working in headwinds, so to speak, for so many years, it is a big change.

Is there more that the apparel industry can do?
There is a huge amount of design flaws in every part of the apparel system, for example, adding treatments that are not needed. There are amazing opportunities and we are exploring many of them still. Right now, we are exploring collaborative consumption, or product as a service solution. This is not new to us; we have done this since 2012 so we have a pretty good sense of how it can cater to the users out there in a much smarter way. When products are owned by individuals, we have to count on them to bring the product back to us for recycling. Not

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everyone will do that, so there are great opportunities for products as a service solution.

You are referring here to the rental service Houdini has offered for a number of years. Why is this a good solution for consumers?
There are so many people who go skiing for one or two weeks a year but still own their ski gear. It hangs in the closet for 50 weeks of the year. We can rent products to consumers like this and this means they can have the best gear when they need it and not have to store it for the rest of the year. They can get it at a better price and get better quality products as they don't need to compromise because of the cost.

The brand is now preparing to launch its first subscription service; how will this work?
Yes. We are estimating that it will be ready within a year. We have been running a pilot for a while now. We see it as a seamless transition from rental to leasing as part of a subscription service. It provides a new way for end users to use our products. The pilot will allow us to be really sure [about how it will work] and then we will launch a digital platform so that it is a truly smart solution for our customers. It will allow customers to share a closet with their peers so that they can switch gear. For example, you might go somewhere that you need heavy-duty gear one week, while the next you need something super lightweight for ski touring. Or you might need training gear ahead of an expedition. Other brands will probably follow Houdini's lead or may already have similar programmes in development.

Does Houdini take pride in being ahead of the curve when it comes to innovation?
We can't say that we don't enjoy it, but it is also really important for us to share. If somebody wants to learn from us, we are happy to share our way of thinking and our knowledge. We would never ask for exclusivity on a sustainable technology. It's about sharing so that we can save the planet. We have not made any demand for exclusivity when it comes to Polartec Power Air, for example. It has been an extremely fast-tracked project so there are limited possibilities for them to produce. Right now, it is only Houdini and adidas [that are using it].

This is quite unusual, isn't it? Many brands would ask for exclusivity on a development like this.
This is completely understandable when you invest a lot of time and money. It is completely fine when it comes to an innovation related to performance or aesthetic. When it comes to sustainable development, it is completely contradictory to keep it to yourself. I am sure that we will see much more collaboration rather than competition. Of course, competition is good, but sharing of knowledge and ideas is something that is happening much more than in the past.

Looking further ahead, what do you think will be the biggest disruptor in the textile industry in the next ten years?
If the synthetics industry, and the plastic industry as a whole, can create a closed-loop system that also solves the microplastic problem, that will be a constructive step that seemed like a dream not so long ago. I am sure now that it will happen and that things will move fast. There are big changes ahead. Within ten years I am sure we will see a great shift in mindset in society. Businesses running at the expense of nature, ecosystems and people, no matter if they are close to home or far away, visible or invisible, simply won't be accepted. With emerging digital technologies enabling greater transparency, companies working against or ignoring this shift will most probably not be around for long. The great thing is that companies who do embrace it will thrive.



Houdini has used Polartec's latest innovation in its Power Air Houdi fleece jacket. It is based on one of the brand's established products.

Houdini

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