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VIEWPOINT

The business of ethics

Ethical fashion sounds like an oxymoron, but in a global industry an alert designer knows that ethics are the 'thing'. Ethics are in the vision statement, the mission statement, and the corporate responsibility statement. But what do they mean to the designer and product developer, what should they be considering?

When the term ethics is used it can be contentious due to its proximity to morals, and judgmental implications. The term is preferable to values because of connections to worth, and morals. There are a variety of definitions in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 'moral principles; rules of conduct' are a good start. Ethicist Professor Peter Singer wrote "an ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, and larger, goals, thereby giving meaning to our lives."

This motivation to be ethical may arise from empathy, or old fashioned humanism. Or it may be a consumer expectation, an outcome of personal activism, a well organised lobby group, an online gripe site or the growing body of ethical purchasing publications targeting the general public. The motivation to address the consumer may inspire product enrichment or point of difference: ethical sourcing, manufacture and inspiration. The final and pragmatic motivator may be legislation. Does this affect the designer? A quick trip online to corporate responsibility reports, human rights or animal welfare pages will make it clear. Choices made at the inception of a company, season, range, or garment have environmental ramifications globally and affect the life experience of other people.

To appreciate how ethics affect fashion design and production it is useful to consider the Fashion Design/Production Loop. It is a prompt to reflect and audit.

There are about thirteen stages on the Fashion Design/Production Loop:

1. **Evolution of concept** - intellectual copyright/property, cultural copyright/property, sizeism (sample and production), ageism, sexism, racism.
2. **Fabric selection** - manmade or natural - environmental impact, animal rights.
3. **Size selection** - sizeism.
4. **Fabric utilisation** - environmental impact.
5. **Garment construction methods** – environmental impact, child labour sweatshops / labour conditions, outworkers.
6. **Selection of manufacturing equipment and running of production unit (energy, waste, etc.)** - environmental impact, sweatshops/labour conditions
7. **Recruitment, employment, conditions and pay of staff** - child labour, sweatshops/labour conditions, outworkers, racism, environmental impact.
8. **Transport** - environmental impact.
9. **Distribution** - environmental impact.
10. **Merchandising** - environmental impact, sizeism, ageism, sexism, racism.
11. **Marketing** - environmental impact, sizeism, ageism, sexism, racism.
12. **Wear/care conditions** - environmental impact.
13. **Disposal** - environmental impact.

Pertinent to each of these stages are related ethical issues:

- copyright/property – intellectual, cultural
- human rights - sizeism (sample and production), ageism, sexism, racism
- labour – children, sweatshops, outworkers
- animal rights
- environmental impact

Ethical responsibility started out as a company extra but is now emerging as a competitive necessity. Companies need ethics. As market leaders follow innovative socially alert companies in taking their ethical responsibility seriously, it will become a global industry requirement.

Workers in those global industries where management, design, production, distribution and sales can happen across several continents, are dependent in part for their (and their families) fiscal, physical and potentially emotional wellbeing on the ethics of the company. Reflecting on the wealth of diversity among the workforce, it is not difficult to appreciate that the workers' ethics may be different, from each other and those of their employers. For a company to demonstrate responsibility and appreciation of its role in the culture of its workers it needs to recognise that its management and operations reflect ethics. However enlightened these may not be those of the workforce. To impose without consultation and discussion would be insensitive and potentially unethical.

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware. They have an expectation of corporate responsibility and ethics in action. The rise of the ethically motivated consumer is supported by the raft of publications, The Rough Guide to Ethical Shopping, Living an Ethical Life, Change the World for a Fiver. Websites related to specific issues, fibres or campaigns and charities prompt consumers. Ethics have been a point of difference, product enrichment, or an added value; it will be an expectation.

Futurists and marketeers point to ethics as a brand expectation; in her book EVEoluntionary relating to selling to women Faith Popcorn wrote "Your new EVEoluntionary goal: A reputation–built and maintained over the long term–for honesty integrity, ethical behaviour, community give-back, and a maniacal attention to detail." Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz put it succinctly: "If people believe they share values with a company, they will stay loyal."

Returning to the practicalities, in an interview discussing inclusive design Richard Seymour, the industrial designer said, "It's too easy to gloss over the issues that a lot of people have in their lives. Sometimes with just a flick of the wrist you can make someone's life much better. It's not a sentimental approach to design. This is a basic piece of humanism."

This is a challenge, to reflect, audit choices, and potentially intervene, perhaps change the thinking, behavior and the world, for someone else. It is important to remember this is beyond tree hugging, saving the whale, or children on production lines or wearing fur. Issues alone are not the motivation here, but the larger holistic concept of responsibility and its source ethics.

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