

SUSTAINABILITY: ADIDAS et al

Adidas recently announced a bold and simple mission: End plastic waste. A look at what the sports brand is doing now, along with landmark products from the past few years, suggests they are well on the way.

Raising the bar on reducing waste

In January, global sports brand adidas announced a major initiative to combat the extraordinary problem of plastic waste. Right now, the company said, there is the equivalent of one ton of plastic for every person on the planet, nearly 80 percent of which has become waste “wreaking havoc on the oceans”. Their end goal: to end plastic waste and be climate neutral by 2050.

That’s a big goal from a big company. To define big: every year adidas produces over 900 million products, and in 2018 they generated sales of €21.915 billion (\$23.71 billion). Any effort by the Germany-based brand has the potential to make a measurable direct impact on the environment and to positively influence the industry as a whole.

Despite its mammoth size, adidas has proven itself nimble enough to experiment with and execute on some of the last decade’s most innovative sports-related products, and its ambitious 2050 goals seem achievable. But how? And how might other sports brands — the huge ones or the startups — get on the same sustainability path?

The answer might lie in a look at the adidas playbook, with these six strategies for getting greener:

1. Set ambitious goals.

The company’s overarching goal could not be more simply stated: End Plastic Waste.

By the end of this year, the brand says more than 50% of all the polyester it uses in products will be recycled. By 2024, all adidas products across the business will use only recycled polyester.

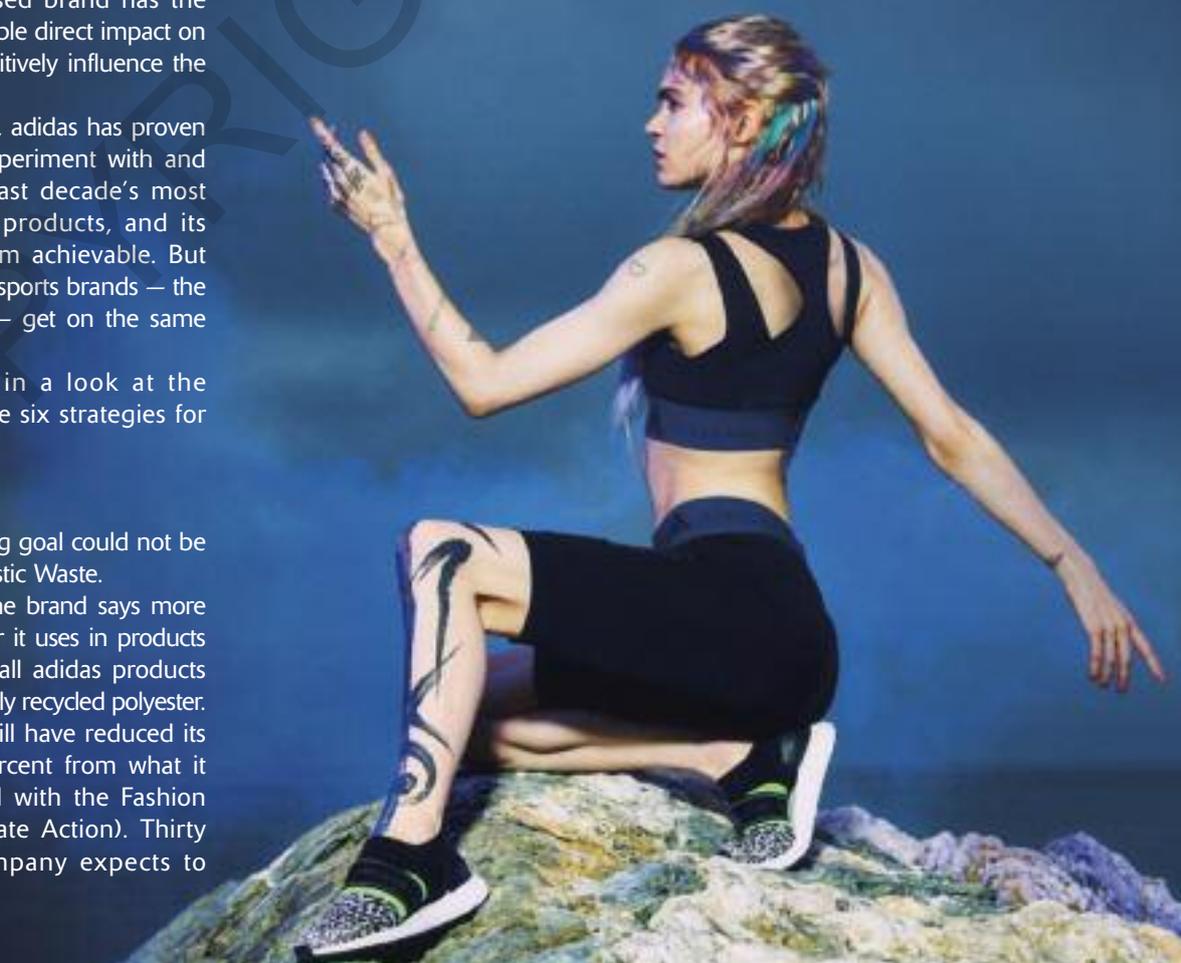
By 2030, the company will have reduced its carbon footprint by 30 percent from what it was in 2017 (this is linked with the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action). Thirty years from now, the company expects to achieve climate neutrality.

Presumably, as the decades tumble toward 2050, more specific goals for the 2030s and 2040s will be announced. But for the time being, the goals of the next decade alone will keep the brand on track.

2. Make products that will remake products that will remake...

Adidas now has a shoe that can be — and has been — entirely recycled and made into a new shoe. That is a single shoe with the potential to reduce waste.

adidas Parley Ocean Plastic and regenerated Econyl yarn was used by adidas in the Stella McCartney line.



The first shoe of Futurecraft Loop launched in early 2019; it was described as a performance running shoe that is 100% recyclable. While trainers are usually made of complex material mixes and component gluing that makes them poor candidates for recycling, this recyclable running shoe was made of only one material and no glue.

With each component made entirely of thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU), the shoes — at the end of their life — can be returned to the brand. They can then be washed, ground into pellets and melted into material for the components of a new shoe.

The first batch of 200 Futurecraft Loop shoes were distributed to beta testers and recollected several months later. The all-white shoes were then put through the recycling process, emerging as another set of 200 shoes. Adidas released the second generation in November, this time in a faded blue to prove that sustainability does not have to limit aesthetics.

3. Stay down-to-Earth.

In 2016, adidas unveiled a shoe using Biosteel fibre, a fully biodegradable high-performance fibre that replicates natural silk. “We are moving beyond closed loop and into an infinite loop — or even no loop at all,” the sports brand said at the time.

The fibre, developed by German biotech company AMSilk, was described by its CEO Jens Klein as the first products worldwide with a high-performance material made of nature-identical silk biopolymers. Adidas said the collaboration achieved an “unrivalled level of sustainability”.

4. Spend more time at the beach.

In the summer of 2015, adidas linked up with Parley for the Oceans, an organisation that aims to raise awareness about ocean conservation. The earliest result of the partnership was a concept shoe with an upper made entirely from yarns and filaments reclaimed and recycled from ocean waste and illegal deep-sea gillnets. The shoe was unveiled at the United Nations headquarters, with promises that consumer-ready ocean plastic products would be available later in the year.

Fast forward to 2018: in that year alone, adidas produced more than five million pairs of shoes containing Parley Ocean Plastic, which they describe as “upcycled plastic waste intercepted from beaches and coastal communities before it reaches the oceans”. The following year, adidas set a target of eleven million pairs.

5. Shoot for the stars.

These materials and methods are not being relegated to some self-contained “Sustainable Collection” that appears at the bottom of the menu to tick the eco-friendly marketing box. The sustainable apparel and shoes are showing



up on celebrities, in flagship pieces and worn by Olympic athletes.

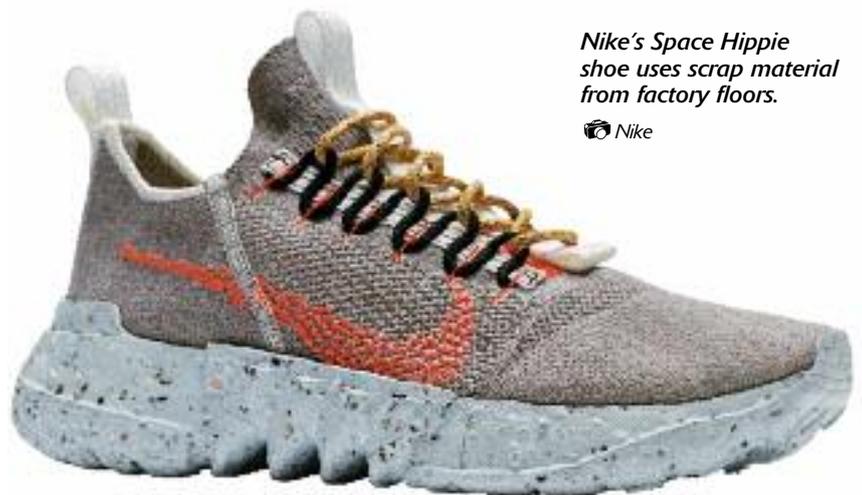
For example, the hugely popular Ultraboost shoe, the Stella McCartney line and kits for all five New Zealand Investec Super Rugby sides are made with Primeblue, a new fabric made from Parley Ocean Plastic. Sustainability, for the brand, is mainstream.

6. Start early.

In part, the company is positioned to make these bold transformations because it has long been on this course. In the late 1990s, according to the company, its factory in Scheinfeld, Germany, was the first in the industry to receive EMAS (the EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme) environmental management system certification — an important step in reducing the environmental footprint of its facilities.

In 2004, adidas was a founding member of the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), which aims to address social and environmental impacts of mainstream cotton farming, including excessive pesticide and water use. In 2007, the brand set up its product sustainability programme, from

A 2016 Futurecraft Biofabric shoe by adidas used silk biopolymers and was 100% biodegradable.



Nike's Space Hippiie shoe uses scrap material from factory floors.



which came the Grün collection, one of its earliest sustainable product ranges. In 2010, as the official sponsor of that year's FIFA World Cup in South Africa, adidas said it was the first to disclose its list of factories involved with producing event merchandise.

In 2012, DryDye was launched, which eliminated the need for water in the dyeing process and reduced the use of chemicals, and adizero Primeknit introduced a new method for making products with no textile waste. The collection for the London 2012 Olympic Games was, at the time, the most sustainable the brand had ever produced.

Not the only one

It is important to note adidas is not the only major sports brand working to attack the waste crisis with bold and transformative moves. One big name after another is nudging the bar higher and higher.

Already this year, Nike has debuted the Atsuma trainer, which maximises pattern efficiency and uses offcuts from one shoe to another, and Space Hippy shoes, which bring new life to factory floor scraps. The company has said its goal of using 100% renewable energy in owned or operated facilities globally by 2025 is on track — a goal it has already achieved in North America.

Reebok is set to launch its first plant-based performance running shoe later this year. The Forever Floatride GROW has a cushioned, responsive midsole built from sustainably-grown castor beans, a eucalyptus tree upper said to be naturally biodegradable, a sockliner made with algae foam, and a natural rubber outsole sustainably sourced from real rubber trees. (Of course, Reebok is an adidas subsidiary, so to some extent this just reinforces the parent brand's sustainability focus.)

Puma has set this year as their target for using



90% sustainable materials in several areas; this includes Leather Working Group approved leather, BCI sourced cotton, Bluesign certified polyester and Forest Stewardship Council packaging paper. Asics says it will be using 100% recycled polyester by 2030.

Nike's Atsuma reduces material waste by increasing pattern efficiency.



The list goes on, though it is currently hard to find a major sports brand that keeps its sustainability efforts so front and centre as adidas. Those lagging on such efforts, however, need to catch up.

In announcing the brand's End Plastic Waste initiative, it wrote: As a big company, adidas has been a big contributor to the problem. Which is why its actions need to be equally as big. The brand invites its partners and competitors to do the same.

"We're not just focused on changing how we do business," said James Carnes, VP of brand strategy. "We're dedicated to changing how our industry does business." 🌍



Adidas has issued a clear mission statement: End plastic waste.

