

Ethics & manufacturing: social responsibility in apparel sourcing

The recent catastrophe in Dacca, Bangladesh, once again brings to light the gruesome working conditions in the garment factories of low-wage labour countries. The pressure is growing on brands to take responsibility for their supply chains and new tools are being developed to help make the sportswear business a fairer one.

Speakers

Pamela Ravasio, TexSture
David Pircher, Product Manager, OEKO-TEX® Association
Sophie Bramel, journalist & moderator

Introduction:

Fair trade is without a doubt a difficult subject to cover within the framework of a short conference, yet the tragic events in South East Asia, in Bangladesh and Cambodia, make it all the more critical. We can only hope that consumer awareness will grow and that sportswear brands will make progress in guaranteeing decent working conditions in the factories that manufacture their products.

Though no products from sports brands were found in the Rana Plaza building collapse, in Bangladesh, this was not the case in Cambodia, where two factories collapsed within the same week (on May 16 and May 20, 2013).

In both countries, many strikes have been organised by workers to demand increased wages and better working conditions.

These countries are also heavily dependent on foreign brands. It is estimated that around 60% of the Bangladesh \$19 billion apparel industry is exported to Europe. In Cambodia, the garment industry is the country's largest income earner, representing more than 80% of the country's exports. It earned \$4.6 billion in 2012 – 8% more than in 2011. (sportstextiles.com)

Q & A

Sophie Bramel: Oekotex is in the process of launching a new sustainable (textile) certification programme (STeP), can you tell us about it and specifically what makes it different from existing programmes and how it addresses fair trade?

David Pircher: The International OEKO-TEX® Association is currently launching on 'Sustainable Textile Production (STeP) by OEKO- TEX®' an optimised, independent certification for environmentally friendly and socially responsible companies. The objective is to provide globally operating textile brands, retail companies and manufacturers along the textile value chain with trustworthy and transparent documentation of their sustainable production conditions.

One focal point of the new STeP certification are extensive criteria based on recognised standards for ensuring socially acceptable working conditions as well as clearly defined guidelines regarding workplace safety. Their implementation will contribute to the future prevention of catastrophes in textile production facilities such as the recent factory fire in Bangladesh.

Sophie Bramel: Through the research you have conducted at consumer level, can you tell us more about consumers' attitudes regarding fair trade products and labels? What do they think of the labels and do they buy the products?

Pamela Ravasio: TexSture's recently published report, 'The Better Consumer in Europe: The trends fashion companies should watch to make good decisions', compiles all the existing data around sustainable consumers - particularly of fashion - in the EU as of to date, analysed it and we also explain what that means for the EU retail market overall.

Generally speaking, consumers are neither purposely ethical nor unethical. In this report we show that purchasing decisions are made as a response to very particular needs and choices related to the range of products available. Importantly however, given choice, sufficient information and a comparable price/quality ratio among products, we found that a majority of consumers are willing to choose the most ethical product among those available to them, despite being valued at a slightly higher price.

Sophie Bramel: For a company looking to promote its ethical (or sustainable) products, what are the dos and donts they should know about?

David Pircher: When buying clothing and textiles, it is not just the price that needs careful examination. The price of a textile product alone says nothing about the quality or the safety regarding possible harmful substances.

Consumers looking for textiles which are harmless to health can find OEKO-TEX® products with the label "Confidence in textiles" in all segments of retail. But consumers who primarily focus on priorities like colour, pattern, fit, durability, material or easy care can also appreciate the additional benefit of products tested for harmful substances.

If you want to be on the safe side your buying principle should be: "Trust is good - certification is better."

Pamela Ravasio: Consumers are reliant on, and generally trust, product labels, as well as certification and accreditation labels for better products. However, they maintain the view that sufficient information is still unavailable to them, and is not presented in a clear and easily digestible format, to fully rationalise their purchasing decisions.

Convenience is important. Therefore, if chain retailers and department stores were willing to offer a larger range of better products, the market will be ready for them.

The price/quality ratio is of high importance to consumers. People are willing to pay extra for better products, up to 20%. However, this is only the case when such products perform at least on the same level as their conventional equivalents.

Consumers resort to buying locally in order to buy sustainably, because they perceive large brands and businesses to be non-transparent and therefore untrustworthy.

Terminology varies from country to country, as do the nuances of what is considered a better, more sustainable, product. This evidently not only affects consumer-based communications, but also the products that are most popular among manufacturers and retailers, and hence are most likely to be found in their ranges.

Background on speaker's organisations

OEKO-TEX® - www.oeko-tex.com

The OEKO-TEX® test and certification system is centrally issued by the International Association for Research and Testing in the Field of Textile Ecology with headquarters in Zurich.

Its current members are 15 independent and accredited facilities for textile testing and research in Europe and Japan. In addition, the OEKO-TEX® Association currently operates 60 contact offices in all important global regions of textile production.

texSture - www.texsture.com

texSture is a single port of call for the textile, fashion, interiors and accessories industry. We support good companies with expert practical solutions, research and training in taking good decisions, and in this way to mitigate risk and reduce uncertainty.

We have an international core team of seasoned experts in their field (e.g. fibres, wet processing, sourcing, design), strategists, executive coaches who use the best available methods to uncover your organisation's inner value and use it to build an enduring competitive advantage. Collectively, we offer some combined 100 years of experience.