“The Biggest Thing We Can Do is Reduce”—Eileen Fisher Shares a Vision for a Sustainable Future

Eileen Fisher

“We have a positive attitude,” begins Eileen Fisher, “But it’s a lot, really. These are certainly some of the biggest days of my life.”

Fisher, who is as famous for her ascetic ready-to-wear as the hardcore environmentalist practices she uses to make it, is calling Vogue from her house in Irvington, New York, where she has been self-isloating and reflecting on the coronavirus pandemic. “First of all, I love working from home. Really, nothing makes me happier than working from home,” she says. That probably won’t come as a surprise to Fisher’s followers, for whom she holds a guru-like position, a spiritual and aesthetic leader with the carefree ease of a Nancy Meyers heroine (and the knitwear to match).
But her fans might be surprised to learn that after the many successes of her Vision 2020 plan to build a radically more eco-friendly business, she has an even more environmentally vigilant vision for the future. Her two obsessions of late, which will be outlined in her upcoming Horizon 2030 manifesto later this month, are regenerative farming and reducing. Over a 30-minute phone call, Fisher and the brand’s vice president of social consciousness Amy Hall outline their plans for a more sustainable future. It’s not just about carbon-footprints, either—as a B Corporation that is owned by its employees, Fisher wants to dramatically transform the workplace for the people within it, too.

How has the Eileen Fisher business been navigating this pandemic?

Fisher: We’re managing, somehow, to struggle through. Right now, we’ve closed our stores, and we’ve furloughed a lot of our employees. We are paying healthcare because we think health is super important. These are some of the most painful decisions we’ve ever had to make... There is no good answer when we’re having to choose between the employees, what’s good for the business, and what’s right. We have to be responsible to the banks and to the vendors too. It’s a fine line we’re walking with a lot of constant listening and trying to make the right decision, communicate, and be as transparent as we can be.

“I think the biggest thing we can do is reduce: Reduce consumption, reduce production”

Right now, we only have our website open. Our website is about 20% of our overall business, and we’re currently on par with our usual numbers. We’re running online sales too, so that helps. [Shifting towards online retail] is how we’re surviving through this, and it’s actually making us really look hard at that aspect of our business and see a lot of potential to improve that. That’s exciting because I think that we’re going to be operating this way for a long time.
I think the biggest thing we’re doing is looking at the whole business. What you probably know about us is that we’re very much about sustainability. We’ve been working hard to have as many of our materials be eco-preferred as possible, and building that. I learned from Amy that one of the most important ways we can be sustainable is to reduce. Just do less: Buy less, consume less, produce less. That’s a really hard line to walk when you’re trying to run a business, and you’re measuring your success by how much you sell.

We’ve discovered that even though we are all about simplicity, sustainable materials, recycling, and all those important things, we still have been producing way too much product. We are pleasing too many masters. We have lost track of the center of our concept, a little.

One of the things that we’ve done over this time is returned to the center of the business: the product itself. We’re talking about how every garment has to have a purpose, and we have to have time to lean in and work towards perfection. Things are never perfect, but we want to really develop and refine our designs and keep making them better. We want to keep making what we do better. That’s been a huge focus.

What do you feel you’ve accomplished from your Vision 2020 plan and how that has inspired you to look to the future and devise a plan for 2030?

Hall: In Vision 2020, we had the goals broken into eight buckets: materials, chemistry, carbon, and water on the environmental side and then on the social side we had conscious business practices, fair wages and benefits, worker voice, and worker and community happiness. Of all of those buckets, I’d say the place we made the most progress was in materials.
We were really pleased with how far we took individual fibers. Nearly 100% of our cotton is now organic, nearly 100% of our linen is now organic. We shifted a vast majority of our wool to what we call “responsible wool,” it’s a certified wool and a vast majority of that is now regenerative. We achieved about 40% of our product dyeing done with Bluesign chemistry. Those are just some examples of our material progress.

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Where we didn’t make as much progress: We backtracked a little bit with carbon. Our energy efficiency actually went down because over the years we have opened more stores, some of our spaces have grown, and we’ve added more digital technology. All of that together uses more electricity.

That set some new goals for us for Horizon 2030. We’re really thinking hard about how we can do this work in a way that actually demonstrates positive impact on the planet and on people, so it’s not just about feeling a little less bad than we did the prior year. Now, we’re talking about doing work around thriving communities; we’re talking about future fibers, which includes our circular work; and we’re talking about climate correction, with the goal being that we want to be able to demonstrate that this is having a net positive impact.

Fisher: Amy, would you talk a little bit more about the regenerative farming idea? I love this because this is one of the places where we can make a positive impact. Rather than just pollute less or do less harm, we can actually kind of revive the earth through the process of making clothes. That really excites me.
Hall: I agree. The farmers that we partner with to raise the sheep that provide the wool, those sheep are grazing on farms that are using regenerative agricultural practices, which means they are rotated through the farm to allow the grass to regenerate, that their droppings are being used to fertilized the earth, that there might be other crops grown on that farm ... the whole thing works as an ecosystem. When the regenerative agricultural practices are followed, the carbon is drawn down from the atmosphere, sequestered in the soil, and trapped—that means we are contributing to actually lower carbon emissions. We’re also increasing the soil health, and we’re also increasing biodiversity. The whole thing works as an amazing system simply by shifting how we source the fiber for our product.

Sorted textile waste at Eileen Fisher's Tiny Factory
Obviously a global pandemic is a net negative occurrence, but we are seeing some silver linings, specifically in regards to the environment. At Vogue’s Global Conversations Stella McCartney pointed out that carbon emissions were down 25% in China in the month of February. Others are pointing to the unpolluted water in Venice or the clear Los Angeles skyline. Stella said that seeing these changes shows that we can undo the environmental mess we’ve made and that gives her hope. Have you found similar silver linings in all this?

Fisher: I do also have that sense of hope and possibility. I fear, though, people won’t understand the meaning and will try to bring the economy back to where it was. When I imagine what’s possible, it’s that maybe we can spread the word more and get more fashion companies and clothing companies engaged in this work of regenerating the land through clothing production, growing organic cotton, and supporting that industry. I love that idea.

Another silver lining, well, we’re thinking a lot about changing clothes [on the whole]. Personally, I’m thinking a lot about my clothes: What clothes do I really need? I really need my ponté pants, and I have these pants called the “hug.” I need both of those pants; they’re so comfortable. I have different shapes in each of those two fabrics and I just wear them every day with my different sweaters—that’s my wardrobe. My five favorite sweaters and my two favorite pants, this is all I need. Why do I think I need so many things?

Do you feel that this pause provides the opportunity for more systemic change within the fashion industry?

Fisher: What is coming up for me is what we’re really doing in reducing. We’re currently trying to shrink down—I mean, we have to because we don’t know how long it will be until we can sell in the volumes that we previously have sold. How do we shrink down in the right way? How do we reduce the amount of work? One of the things that keeps coming up is how we can think about the delivery schedule. We have been pressured to deliver more and more; seasonal deliveries weren’t enough, we needed monthly deliveries, and then we needed bi-monthly deliveries.
“Going forward we need to find a way for all new businesses to have to be responsible for their environmental and social impacts”

We’re all about simple, why are we making more, more, more all time? I think this is really a great opportunity to stop and think about how we flow product into the store, how we create product that is more timeless, and find ways to refresh it and make it new so it doesn’t get stale or boring, but so that enough of the product can stay for a much longer period. It makes no sense to mark down black pants and bring in more new black pants. We’re really being thoughtful, and I hope this is an invitation to the whole industry.

But back to the point about reducing, I think the biggest thing we can do is reduce: Reduce consumption, reduce production. That’s what’s happening right now, that’s why the air is clear in some places! What does that mean for businesses that do a certain amount of volume and have a lot of employees? People’s livelihoods are at stake.

If reducing is the goal, it seems that recycling or upcycling—like you do with the Re/New program of taking back old garments and remaking them into new ones—would be the way to not only close the loop of a product’s life cycle but to continue to produce items without introducing virgin material or having to cut jobs.

Fisher: Exactly. I think we employ about 30 people in Re/New right now without making any new products, and it’s a profitable piece of the business. I think that’s a huge opportunity for a lot of companies to do a lot of that.
I also heard an idea years ago in Holland where they had a crisis with unemployment, so they got the top business leaders together and they decided to create five jobs for every four positions they had. People would make less, but they would only work four days a week. It reduced unemployment to 3% within a year or two and people liked it so much, a lot of people [in the Netherlands] are still at a four day workweek. Maybe we could have better lives with less—especially now as we come to understand what’s essential in our lives and what we really need.

The other thing I want to say is that we’re a B Corporation. It’s a model where we measure our social and environmental impact and we have to meet certain standards to be a B Corp. I think going forward we need to find a way for all new businesses to have to be responsible for their environmental and social impacts. I think B Corps are a beautiful new model for capitalism and a new way.