Madewell, Patagonia, and Eileen Fisher want to buy your old clothes

The newest fashion trend: Brands want to prolong the life of your clothes by finding new uses for them long after they’ve left your closet.

By now, you’ve probably seen some of the stats about how the apparel industry is wreaking havoc on our planet. As a fashion writer, I read through these figures every day, and they are staggering to me. McKinsey reported the world tipped over into manufacturing 100 billion articles of clothing annually in 2014. (Consider that there are only 7 billion humans that inhabit the Earth.) The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a sustainability nonprofit, says that the average number of times that a garment is worn before it stops being used has gone down by 36% over the last 15 years, and many consumers wear items less than 10 times before they chuck them out.

This means that all of the pollution generated from sourcing raw materials, manufacturing them into garments, and transporting them around the world results in pieces of clothing that someone might only wear a couple of times. At that point, the wearer might throw it out to make room for new clothes. And even if that outfit just sits, unworn, in the closet or basement, it is effectively going to waste. Some experts estimate that the average consumer only wears 20% of the clothes they own.

The good news is that consumers are increasingly aware of the environmental impact of their clothing, studies show. And a few large, environmentally conscious brands like Madewell, Patagonia, and Eileen Fisher are tackling the problem in clever ways by taking back your old clothes and putting them to new use. This ensures a garment keeps circulating in the economy rather than ending up in a landfill. Research has found that selling or donating garments extends their life for 2.2 years.
Of course, consumers have always been able to donate clothes or resell them through consignment stores. But these brands are creating new systems to make it easier and more enticing for customers to bring them back to the store in exchange for store credit. The theory goes that if reselling products becomes the norm, it could reduce the demand for entirely new products altogether.

This process—of collecting clothes, refurbishing them, and finding new ways to sell them—has environmental costs as well. Transporting clothes generates carbon emissions, for instance, and cleaning them might pollute water and generate microplastics (tiny particles of plastic that come off when you wash synthetic materials). It would be better for the environment if people did not accumulate so many unused clothes to begin with, and instead bought durable pieces and wore them as long as possible. But it’s a tough behavior to change. So brands are finding ways to keep items circulating in the economy for longer—by making what’s old seem new.

The latest brand to hop on this trend is Arc’teryx. This month, the Canadian outdoor clothing company launched a new program called Rock Solid Used Gear allowing customers to sell their lightly used Arc’teryx products back to the brand in exchange for a gift card for 20% of the original retail price of that item. Arc’teryx will then refurbish these items so that they are in like-new condition, and sell them on a special section of the Arc’teryx website at prices that are about a third less than they would be new. “There are many items that our customers buy and wear until they reach the end of their life,” says Drummond Lawson, Arc’teryx’s director of sustainability. “But we’re betting that there are some items that are sitting in our customer’s basements or storage closets that still have plenty of life in them. This gives them an opportunity for them to lighten their load and get some money back for it.”
Arc’teryx estimates that 65% of the environmental footprint of its garments comes from producing the raw materials and manufacturing them. The rest comes from caring for them—such as, say, washing them—and then disposing of them. So if each Arc’teryx jacket, base layer, or bag is used as much as possible before the end of its lifecycle, Arc’teryx can ensure that fewer of the resources used to make it went to waste.

Arc’teryx’s program and others like it are not without risks. An important business consideration: If you’re suddenly flooding the market with inexpensive products, will that dilute the brand and discourage customers from buying full-priced items? In this sense, the design of the resale program matters. “We hope that customers who sell back products to us will use their gift cards to buy used products from the Rock Solid Used Gear site,” Lawson says. “Then we’ll be creating a circular system.” In other words, by creating a resale market on its site, Arc’teryx is creating a new revenue stream for itself. “We think this will expand our possible consumer base,” Lawson says. “Suddenly more people can afford to buy our gear.”

Here are some other brands working to breathe new life into their products in a range of creative ways:

**THEREALREAL X STELLA MCCARTNEY**

Some brands aren’t selling their used products themselves, but are instead relying on other resale sites to help them extend the life of their products. After all the business of recommerce—or selling secondhand products—can be complex. It involves assessing the quality of a used product to see if it is actually sellable, and also managing the logistics of receiving and shipping these products to and from customers.
Luxury brand Stella McCartney has partnered with TheRealReal, an online consignment store, to encourage customers to consign their lightly used products to extend their life. When someone consigns a Stella McCartney item on TheRealReal, they receive a $100 gift card to buy something on the Stella McCartney store.

**REFORMATION X THREDUP**

To educate customers about the environmental benefits of reselling products, Reformation launched a partnership with ThredUp. On Reformation’s website, there are details about how ThredUp works and how much money someone could earn by selling their used clothes and accessories. (ThredUp pays between 5% and 90% of the list price of the item.) To encourage customers to clean out their closets, Reformation is currently giving customers an extra 15% in Reformation store credit—even if they are not selling Reformation clothes.

**PATAGONIA**

Patagonia is one of the pioneers of preserving the life of its products. The company has a robust program called Worn Wear, which invites customers to send in worn items that are in need of repair, where they will be fixed up. There are also events around the country where customers can bring in products in person to be repaired. But if customers don’t want to hold onto an item that is in good condition, they can trade it in for store credit. Depending on the type of item, customers can receive between $10 and $100 for their used goods. These items are then sold on a separate Worn Wear website, where customers can snag secondhand gear for a fraction of their full retail price.
THE NORTH FACE

The North Face’s program isn’t focused on reselling, but rather donating used gear to people who need it. It’s Clothes The Loop program invites customers to bring any footwear or jackets into a retail or outlet store—no matter what condition it is in or what brand it is—and get a $10 voucher toward any purchase of $100 or more at The North Face. The company will then weed through all these garments, recycle anything that is no longer usable, and donate garments that still have life in them to a nonprofit partner that will distribute clothes and shoes to people who need it.

EILEEN FISHER

Eileen Fisher has a program called Waste No More that encourages customers to keep the brand’s products in circulation for as long as possible. Customers are invited to bring used items back into the store, no matter what condition they are in. (They will receive $5 for each item they bring in, which can be used to purchase more used Eileen Fisher garments.) When Eileen Fisher receives an item, the company will either refurbish it and sell it at a special Renew store (which is both online and at physical locations) or, if it’s damaged beyond repair, transform it into unique pieces of artwork or home products. The company recently had an art exhibit where it displayed all the art that was created using these goods.

MADEWELL

Madewell has a slightly different program that transforms old denim jeans into insulation for houses—which still ensures the items stay in use long after they are out of style. Their program, which is called Blue Jeans Go Green, allows customers to hand over used denim—from any brand—to a Madewell store to receive a $20 voucher toward new Madewell jeans. The brand partners with Habitat for Humanity and other nonprofits that create houses for people in need to turn them into materials that will keep homes warm in the winter. In addition to providing resources to people who need it, the program also keeps the jeans out of landfills.