Bridget Foley’s Diary: Eileen Fisher’s Views on Sustainability

These conversations started with one primary question: How does a manufacturing-based industry like fashion reconcile sustainability with growth? From there, numerous industry leaders in the forefront of the drive toward increased environmental consciousness wended in all sorts of provocative directions. Here is Eileen Fisher’s take.

WWD: How does a manufacturing-based industry like fashion reconcile growth with responsibility?

Eileen Fisher: It’s a really important topic. I’m a privately owned B corporation, so I have a certain advantage here to be able to make choices that are more long-term and more philosophically based, like this is the right thing to do, even if it costs more. But I know that it’s an issue with public companies.

It’s an issue for us, too, because we have to make profits, we have to sell clothes. It has to work together. So our commitment is to work hard towards making everything we make more sustainable and to really force the path to a fully sustainable company. That’s what we’re trying to do. But at the same time, how do you keep growing, and is that even the right goal? That’s the question.
WWD: No conclusions there?

E.F.: I think that we have to look in general at business and ask ourselves if profit is the only goal. It’s urgent for us, all businesses, to be thinking more long-term. I feel like it’s incumbent on us to take responsibility for our externalities, for the water and the air and the damage that business does.

So a long-term strategy is important. If businesses don’t really get on it, it’s going to be a disaster for our planet. The U.N. tells us we have 10 to 12 years before catastrophe if we don’t act. So just from basic moral and philosophical reasons, we have to do that.

At the same time, these CEO’s have to answer quarterly to the shareholders, so you have to find a way to make it work. It’s something that we think a lot about. But the question you’re asking is about business and how do we marry these ideas. I think it’s possible. Some things cost more. Some of it is training the customer to understand why it costs more, or we absorb some of the costs because we know it’s the right thing to do. It’s coming down the pike, this idea that we can’t go on taking from our environment and not covering the costs of that.

With business, you have movements like B Corp. You can’t be a B Corp. if you’re not measuring your environmental and social impacts and moving forward in those areas. So that is a great, different model for business. But also large corporations, now you have the financial world [involved]. Larry Fink, for example, from Blackrock. Blackrock is a huge financial institution and they are now saying that they are paying attention to the environment, to the [processes] of the companies that they invest in. That’s a new piece of information. It’s new in the financial world for companies to measure and be responsible for the externalities.

Also, the customer is starting to wake up and think about sustainability when she makes purchases. She, or he — but we know 80 percent of domestic purchases, or something like that are made by women. We are very powerful. The more awake she is, the more she’s going to support the companies that are either B Corp. or that she knows are producing sustainably made products. So her voice is going to matter more and more.

The point is that the business itself has to change, move toward this idea of thinking more long-term and not just quarterly. Some companies are saying they’re not going to report quarterly anymore.
WWD: I know.

E.F.: That’s pretty amazing. Today, a long-term strategy has to include sustainability; otherwise it doesn’t work. We have some concrete examples in our own business. Renew, for example, our program to take our clothes back and resell them. So there’s that whole vintage market, recycled clothing. People wanting to buy the renewed garments. We also have the Waste No More project. We’ve been doing this for almost 10 years, so we have warehouses full of clothes. We’re now remaking them into these felted art pieces. We just did a big show in Milan — huge success. We sold almost every piece we had there. And we weren’t even trying to sell things because that show isn’t really about selling. People were just excited about what we were doing. We’re hearing things like, “This could double your business, this is incredible.”

WWD: That’s amazing.

E.F.: But we also put out the idea that less is more, less by design, that you don’t have to have a lot of clothes but that you can have the right ones and if you shop more consciously, that you can get the things that work and last. And the idea that we don’t [always] have to make more clothes, that we can grow just by using and reusing the stuff that we have. That’s exciting to me.

WWD: You have to think creatively not just from a design standpoint, but in how you’re approaching the business.

E.F.: Right. One of the messages I want to get across is around the creativity in this industry, if we apply it to problem-solving this sustainability problem. You see the young people doing it. You see many young companies that are really committed to finding new, different ways to waste less, to be environmentally friendly, that kind of thing. And the response, the Millennials, it’s a good response.

WWD: You’ve talked about the financial world starting to come around to environmental awareness. But when it comes to the triple bottom line — people, planet, profits — is it realistic to expect companies not to put profits first?

E.F.: I don’t know. First or second, it’s part of the whole. It needs to be embedded in the work that people do every day. I think it’s inseparable from long-term success. People need to get on it, or honestly they’re not going be in business in five or 10 years.

WWD: This industry is very focused on developing young talent through prizes and investment. On one hand it’s great, we need the fresh talent and perspectives. But more companies means more production and more footprints. Is there an antithetical situation there?
E.F.: That’s a good question. The young people who are coming in, [they’re doing] a lot of work around sustainability, so I think we have to applaud them and support them; the way they’re thinking is different. I do think in general we produce way too much stuff. I think that it’s going to catch up to us all at some point.

I don’t know the right answer. You can’t ignore the young talent; [they deserve] opportunities. At the same time, what? Do the larger companies scale back? Do they invest in the young talent? They seem to just shift from one company as it starts to lose steam; they move onto the next generation.

Liz Claiborne is no longer around. If companies don’t continue to be relevant, then the focus shifts to the new, emerging brands. Hopefully, the new ones are thinking more sustainably. They’re getting a lot more of that kind of training in the schools today, so it’s a little bit more embedded in the way they think.

WWD: Still, there is an awful lot being produced all up and down the food chain.

E.F.: I agree, at all price points. I think it is just way too much. My theory is if we can’t do it sustainably, we can’t do it anymore. That’s how I feel. I don’t think the rest of the industry is there, by any means. Then the dilemma of fast fashion.

WWD: It seems to me that there’s a degree of elitist rhetoric regarding fast fashion. Yes, there’s way too much being produced, and over-consumption is a huge problem. But most people buy fast fashion because that’s what they can afford.

E.F.: I hear what you’re saying, and there’s something democratic about being able to purchase things at reasonable prices. To think that it’s just the top few percent that can afford to buy even my clothes is terribly upsetting to me.

But I also think that we need to change our mentality and shop more consciously. I am very impressed with Marie Kondo, for example, and how she talks about joy and cleaning your closets and keeping what you love that sparks joy. There’s so much accumulation. Whether it’s fast fashion or luxury fashion, it’s still too much stuff.

So how do we all slow down and shop consciously? And what does that mean from my end? How do we sell differently, think differently, work with the customer differently? We are testing some programming around this. We’re bringing women into our stores to say, stop, slow down. We show the line carefully, and encourage them to feel and think about the clothes differently, not just shop quickly and impulsively, but to slow down and see how the line works and buy the things that work for them. We’re playing with that idea: How do we share how to think differently about purchasing?
WWD: The Marie Kondo of it all is very interesting. Other people have brought that up.

E.F.: It’s that idea of simplifying, but you can still find joy, you can have the things you love. We need to clean our closets regularly; it’s a really hard thing to do. But if we do it, we shop more consciously and we’re more likely to get the things that we need, and to remember the things that we wore a lot and if we need to replace them, what was it about them that worked for us — the neckline, the shape, the proportions, the fabric? We need to understand what our needs are not only be impulsively drawn towards something amazing. But we need some of that, too. We need the inspiration because that’s the joy piece. It’s a balance.