Here’s What It Takes For Fashion Brands To Be Sustainable. Can The Industry Be Saved?

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By now, the fashion industry’s harmful effects on the environment are well-known. With natural resources being used faster than they can be renewed, and more clothing produced by brands (and thrown out by consumers) than ever before, the environmental impact of the industry, as it currently operates, is catastrophic. “In the U.S., 11 million tons of textiles go into landfills every year,” says Kristy Caylor, CEO and co-founder of For Days, a zero-waste, organic line of basics. “When these clothes decompose, they release methane which is more harmful than CO2.”

With this in mind, many fashion brands have been reconsidering their practices over the last few years. In 2015, Mara Hoffman, the founder of the eponymous fashion brand, made a turn for the sustainable. “The switch was prompted by discomfort. When I started to learn about the fashion industry’s harmful impact on the environment, I realized that I wasn’t willing to move the company forward in this way any longer,” Hoffman tells Refinery29. “It also came from a heightened awareness of having a kid who was three at the time, and understanding what my actual ‘legacy’ would be and what his reality would be, dealing with the stuff I left behind. This left us with two options: to close shop or completely change our methods. So we chose to change our methods.”

Now, she is one of the leading voices of sustainability in fashion, and as well known for that as for her aesthetic. But, according to her, the switch wasn’t easy. “Five-and-a-half years ago was a different world in sustainability, it was challenging to convince the wholesalers that had been buying from us for years and had certain expectations that this new way was what people would want down the line,” Hoffman says. However, she has proven she’s on the right side of history: Consumers’ shopping habits have indeed been changing, with an increasing number of shoppers in 2020 interested in secondhand fashion and sustainable brands.
“We have seen shifts in how our customer thinks about sustainability. In the early days [the mid-’90s], they used to ask about where the product was made or whether the product was made in a sweatshop. When we first started to celebrate Earth Day in our retail stores [in the mid-2000s] — with a focus on organic product — the customer would ask what the difference was between ‘organic’ and ‘natural,’” says Amy Hall, VP of Social Consciousness at Eileen Fisher, a brand that has been a champion of the movement long before it was one, and whose sustainable practices range from the fabrics selected to its take-back programs. “Now, we hear about all kinds of issues from our customers, such as animal welfare, living wages, and chemical toxicity. Our customer is much more educated and informed than a decade ago.”

There is also the fact that, with the prevalence of greenwashing — the process of making companies appear more sustainable than they really are — and the many definitions the fashion industry applies to the word “sustainable,” it’s often hard for consumers to tell which brands are genuinely following eco-friendly practices and which are just exploiting the practice’s current popularity. “The key is to consider if brands are just using buzzwords or if they’re actually describing and detailing their practices,” says Dittmer. “If sustainability is truly a part of the brand’s overall mission, you will be able to tell from the way they talk about the clothing and manufacturing processes. I am always wary when I can’t find any information on the brand online — it generally means considering their practices and sustainability overall is not a priority.”
Cassandra Dittmer, a sustainable brand consultant and stylist, confirms that today’s consumer wants to make better choices: “People do understand the need to shop sustainably. Conceptually we know it’s the right thing to do, but access to responsible brands is not always readily available.” She points to price as one of the biggest factors that deters shoppers from buying sustainable fashion, which is typically more expensive to buy new. “Being able to shop sustainably is a huge privilege because that means you are able to make choices,” says Dittmar. “Many people today don’t have the time or means to make sustainable choices when they are trying to support themselves and a family on living wages. We need to work on finding more accessible options if we want the masses to have the ability to get on board.”

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As such, transparency is key, and “creates an architecture for accountability, both internally and externally, and it also invites your community into the journey and the joy behind the creation of the product,” says Vanessa Barboni Hallik, founder and CEO of Another Tomorrow, a fashion brand whose products allow customers to scan a QR code on the care label to see the provenance of each garment and what choices we made along the way to make it. “Transparency is critical to the future of sustainable fashion, and fashion period — it raises the bar for all companies by changing the expectations customers have, creates accountability, and really restores that connection between the customer and who made their clothes, which creates a real foundation for respect.”
That said, the treatment of garment workers and fair wages is still a topic that often gets overlooked when talking about fashion sustainability. According to Sami Miro, founder of Sami Miro Vintage that uses existing upcycled and vintage (as well as organic) fabrics for its collections, the two are inherently connected though: “If we’re talking about sustainability, then it’s about the planet. But the people aspect of it is, in a way, a different subject. But really, if you’re going to be good to the planet, you have to be good to the people within the planet, too.”

As consumers continue to demand transparency and ethical practices from companies, more fashion brands will be motivated to become more sustainable — if only to stay relevant. “I do see more brands following more sustainability practices,” says Chantel Davis, founder and designer of swimwear line Castamira, says. “When a brand knows that it can make a profit while making a difference, it’s a win-win situation.”

So then what does a genuinely sustainable brand look like? “Being truly sustainable varies by region and it’s not a one-size-fits-all label,” says Dittmer. “Personally, before working with or recommending any brand, I always consider the three Es — economics, environment, and ethics — that go into the creation of a new product. From there, it’s about making the best decision possible.”

Ahead, we look at some of the biggest things that sustainable brands consider when making theirs.

**What Are Sustainable Fabrics?**

One of the first decisions that every brand makes when operating in a sustainable manner is fabric choice. Many eco-friendly brands opt for natural materials, avoid synthetics that contribute to microplastics, support farmers that use innovative practices to restore the local ecosystem, and look for long-lasting, high-quality fabrics.
“[In 2015] we started slowly by replacing existing fabrics,” says Hoffman. “You want to invest in fabrics and materials that will last and achieve a certain level of quality.” This, understandably, led to an increase in price. Miro says that the key to a more sustainable future is for consumers to understand why it costs more to do things more ethically. “The biggest problem in terms of sustainability is a lot of people don’t understand. Some people are like, ‘Why is this item so expensive for my brand?’ And there are a lot of reasons why,” she says. “The first is that we buy high-quality upcycled fabric.” When you add a short supply chain and fair wages to that, it’s even easier to understand why the costs add up — and why a T-shirt *should* cost more than the $7.99 it does at a fast-fashion store.

When it comes to material like cotton, organic is much more than a buzzword. “The cotton industry is a very significant user of chemical pesticides and insecticides, including some of the most hazardous pesticides on the market. Organic and regenerative farming is crucial to reducing this chemical usage for the sake of biodiversity, soil health, and the health of local farming communities,” says Barboni Hallik.

In addition to using organic fabrics, Miro uses upcycled and vintage materials — something that’s become increasingly popular with brands looking to combat waste. “Upcycled fabrics are fabrics that have already been created by other brands. They’re essentially waste, they’re leftover fabric that wasn’t used. So when you buy upcycled fabric, it’s so much better for the planet, because it eliminates the additional need to manufacture, which causes a lot of the problems that are happening, and is one of the biggest reasons why fashion is so detrimental to our planet,” says Miro. “You’re taking waste, fabric that would essentially be going into our landfills, and creating beauty out of them.”

The longer the fabric can be kept in rotation, the better it is for the environment. “A product can be made from upcycled materials, worn by a customer, then contributed back into the same product cycle. The primary goal of any product is to keep it in circulation for as long as possible before breaking it down and upcycling it into new materials,” says Hall. “Once that happens, the new goal is to keep that upcycled product in circulation for as long as possible. And, overall, to reduce — or even eliminate — the use of virgin resources in any new material.”
In addition to upcycled and vintage options, some have taken to using fabrics made from literal waste. Girlfriend Collective, an activewear line, made a name for itself in recent years for using materials like recycled post-consumer bottles in their sports offerings. Castamira similarly uses Econyl® for some of its swimsuits. “This yarn is made from fishing nets from our oceans, including fabric scraps from mills and carpets that would end up in the landfill,” says Davis. “This was to recycle landfill materials and what filled the oceans.”

**How Do Labor Practices Affect Sustainability?**

Since the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, consumers have become increasingly aware of the mistreatment of workers behind some of the biggest names. “The fashion industry is increasingly built on cheap and fast fashion. We seem to forget that, without the garment workers, none of our products would exist. Yet, we collectively forget that, with each ‘haul’ of cheaper trendy garments, the people who made those garments may not have been paid enough to buy food for their family,” says Hall.

As consumers are looking to improve their shopping habits, ignoring the inhumane treatment of workers is impossible. This conversation has been heightened even more in recent months as several brands refused to pay for orders that were already being produced during COVID-19, resulting in a loss of income for people who depend on the little wages they do make. To highlight the issue, Miro asks to think about the process it takes to make that $7.99 T-shirt:

> "You choose the fabric, create the fabric. You wash and dye the fabric. Then the fabric gets sewn by a human. And then the fabric gets shipped. So think about all of those steps — how much the fabric costs, what it costs to make the product, what it cost to wash the fabric, what it costs to sew the fabric, and then what it costs to ship it. And yet, even with a $7.99 price point, these fast fashion brands are still making a profit, obviously. They’re worth billions now... How much is the person who’s sewing that garment getting paid for it to still be $7.99 retail price? It’s frightening.”

"We collectively forget that, with each ‘haul’ of cheaper trendy garments, the people who made those garments may not have been paid enough to buy food.”

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**AMY HALL, VP OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AT EILEEN FISHER**

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If a brand wants to be truly sustainable, it has to make labor practices part of every sustainability conversation, and ensure that the people behind the clothing are making living wages and working under good conditions. “You cannot be a ‘sustainable’ brand if you do not advocate for the humans behind it,” Hoffman says. “The treatment of humans across all supply chains — from the farmers and factory workers to distribution center employees through to staff at an HQ— should be a priority for all companies.”

**What Does It Mean To Have A Short Supply Chain?**

With items manufactured in other countries from the point of purchase, there is also the issue of CO₂ emissions. “Moving things around takes a lot of energy and our current global logistics system is still powered by a lot of fossil fuels, which has a material contribution to global warming. The fashion industry is notorious for having far-flung supply chains where the components of a single garment may travel all over the world before its final manufacturing and shipment to the end consumer,” says Barboni Hallik. “We try to mitigate that by keeping our supply chain as short as possible. For example, we manufacture our garments as close to where our fabrics are made as possible and we are constantly looking for raw material sources that are more local as well.”

Miro likewise keeps the supply chain short. “My supply chain starts and ends in Los Angeles. So I’m not shipping all of this fabric from China. I’m not having the pieces sewn in China, and then shipping it to me, and then distributing it from Los Angeles. It’s made in L.A., and it ships from L.A. So eliminating all of the production made in another country, and then shipping it to here.”

**What Can Fashion Do To Make Eco-Friendly Packaging?**

Sustainability doesn’t end with the making of a finished product — it still needs to be packaged and sent to the consumer. While brands can’t control how far away their customer is, they can use recycled and recyclable packaging to ship the product. “EcoEnclose [eco-friendly packaging and shipping supplier] is a supplier of ours for our polymer bags which are 100% recyclable,” says Davis. “Plastics and other trash can take tens even hundreds of years to break down in the environment.” That’s why many are trying to eliminate plastic altogether. For example, Mara Hoffman introduced a paper bag this year as part of the brand’s goal of eventually eliminating all plastics from its packaging. Meanwhile, For Days tries to use reusable packaging whenever possible.
“Packaging is a big part of the impact of any consumer product, and we took great care in ensuring that our packaging has the lightest footprint possible,” says Barboni Hallik of Another Tomorrow’s initiatives, which start with organic cotton garment bags and hangers made from 100% cellulose fiber from recycled pulp and go all the way to compostable stickers. “The key decision points are often in the details — for example, there is a lot of packaging labeled as compostable that is only compostable in industrial facilities to which most consumers do not have access. So you really have to do the research.”

**How Fashion Can Close The Loop**

More recently, conversations about closing the loop have come up when talking about sustainability in fashion — and for good reason. “A closed-loop system means that products, materials, and resources stay in circulation and retain maximum value versus ending up in landfill. At For Days, we make it easy and incentivize customers to close the loop by sending us their old clothing, and we do the rest,” says Caylor. “We sort, grade, and determine if it can be reused or requires recycling. We then work with post-consumer recycling partners to upcycle the fabric into new fiber, new yarns, new fabrics, and new garments.” Not only does For Days take its own clothing and exchange it for new items via its SWAP system, but it also accepts other brands’ products via its Take Back Bags, to keep *all* clothes out of landfills.

They are not alone. Eileen Fisher’s Renew and Waste No More programs, according to Hall, are the two pillars of the brand’s circular effort. “One of our proudest initiatives is Eileen Fisher Renew, which began in 2009 as a clothing take-back program. Now in our 11th year, Renew has collected nearly 1.5 million Eileen Fisher garments, half of which are still in perfect condition and can simply be cleaned and resold,” says Hall. “The rest are sorted and fed into different channels: some are resold as ‘not quite perfect’ pieces; some are cut up and reassembled into fun, limited-edition collections; and some go into our Waste No More brand of felted pillows, wall-hangings, and furniture coverings.”
Mara Hoffman also has a take-back program in partnership with the Renewal Workshop, which cleans, repairs, and sends back the brand’s clothing for resale. “The goal is to keep things out of landfills for as long as possible,” says Hoffman. “We also invite our customers to send us back any pieces they no longer wear. This partnership helps us increase the longevity of our garments. Since August 2018, we’ve sent 884 pounds of damaged Mara Hoffman garments to The Renewal Workshop for repair.” With more brands taking responsibility for everything they put out into the world, they are partially taking the onus off of the customer who has long been stumped by what to do once their clothing reached the end of its lifecycle.

Designing with longevity in mind has, too, become an important hallmark of a sustainable fashion brand. “For us, circularity means ethically produced, exceptional quality products with long lifecycles and extending those lifecycles even further through resale,” says Barboni Hallik. “On average, increasing the longevity of a garment by even nine months decreases its carbon footprint by over a quarter. Imagine doing so for years and years.”

More brands are starting to think about resale. This summer, Mara Hoffman partnered with The RealReal, a luxury secondhand retailer, to sell its pieces at discounted prices. “Companies like TheRealReal really embody what we are talking about when it comes to longevity of a garment and keeping clothing out of landfills, this is why it is crucial to design quality pieces. If you don’t love your piece anymore, consigning to TheRealReal gives the garment another chance at life with someone who does. This cycle of passing a garment on could be endless,” says Hoffman.

While these are all applause-worthy initiatives, it still falls largely on the consumers to do the work. “Brands can’t close their loops without the help of customers. It is, after all, up to the customers to bring back their previously worn garments, whether directly to the brand or to another reclamation point, so that brands can then choose a new path for those old garments. That said, the customers need convenient and efficient ways to upcycle their old garments,” says Hall.
So What Can Brands And Consumers Do Next?

There’s a lot for brands and consumers to consider when making sustainable choices, but it’s important to remember that change won’t happen overnight. “While there is a lot of greenwashing out there right now, I don’t believe in shaming brands that don’t have every area of their supply chain completely sustainable,” says Dittmer. With that said, she believes that everyone can do better by starting to examine their current habits. “Every brand and consumer can make the effort to rewire the way they run their business and brain to be more conscious,” she says. “The best thing you can do [as a consumer] is buy less. Take a step back and resist the urge to be fueled by the quick release of fast fashion. Instead, work to integrate mindfulness into your purchasing decisions.”

Miro agrees that consumers need to stop viewing fashion as disposable. “I think that’s a pretty typical assumption that people make when they know they’re buying something from a fast-fashion brand. They’re like, ‘Okay, I’ll probably get one or two uses out of this dress or whatever it is, and then I’ll throw it away.’ If you invest a little bit more, you’ll get a lot more time out of the pieces that you buy,” she says. “What I focus on is not creating a collection of abundance and pieces that aren’t really necessary, but on what my customer wants, and something that she’s going to wear frequently. Produce high-quality garments that aren’t just a one-wear and then throw it away. The pieces that I create the customers will have for years and years and years.”

All the brands interviewed for this piece emphasized the need to design fashion that will last. “Climate change is an undeniable reality — just look at what is happening in California right now. Once we really dug down and learned about the negative impact that the fashion industry has on the earth, there was no turning back. We know that putting clothing into the world is inherently not sustainable, so our focus is on creating the least harmful impact on the earth and its inhabitants,” says Hoffman. “We design each piece with longevity in mind. We ask questions: Will this garment be timeless? Will it hold up for the wearer to re-wear over and over? How can we ensure we offer an end of life option?” It’s the same questions that consumers should be asking themselves, too, before purchasing.
“Brands can do a few key things: assess how much they produce and sell, how often they introduce new styles and collections, where every fiber comes from, how each item is made, and how purchasing practices and decision-making processes impact their supply chains,” says Hall. “We believe that limiting the harm we do is no longer enough — we must leave the places we touch better than we found them.”

Or at least do everything in our power to try.