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—Eileen Fisher

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—Eileen Fisher

EILEEN FISHER as seen in...

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON MCKENZIE FRASER (BOTTOM), MARK MAHANEY (TOP), BÉATRICE PELTRE (OPPOSITE PAGE). ILLUSTRATIONS BY NOMOCO.

On our cover
Eileen Fisher clothing is just one part of this businesswoman’s story. From recycling materials to mentoring young women, there’s more to Fisher design than meets the eye. page 42

Photograph by Mark Mahaney

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She Wears It Well

Entering her 30th year of business, designer Eileen Fisher wears the mantle of leadership with the ease and flowing style of her clothing. Her company is not only doing well, it’s doing good—for employees, young women, and the planet.

By Barry Boyce
Photographs by Mark Mahaney

In 1992 Eileen Fisher moved her company from trendy Tribeca in Manhattan to suburban Irvington in Westchester County. She wanted her son, Zack, to have a backyard to play in. “I could come home and start cooking while he was outside playing,” she tells me. Well, she didn’t exactly cook; she admires, but she was at home. Only recently has she had time to get into cooking. She’s been a little too busy creating the burgeoning clothing empire that bears her name—with more than 60 retail stores, distribution through department stores and boutiques in 90 countries, a thousand employees, and over $350 million in annual revenues. But she’s sworn it all in the same spirit as getting that backyard for Zack. It’s domestic. It’s a family. It’s caring. Nobody lasts at Eileen Fisher, she says, if they aren’t kind.

The fashion industry has a hard reputation, conjuring images of NYC’s Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, undernourished, underaged models, and heavily marked-up products manufactured in Third World sweatshops...
Eileen Fisher has been recognized as one of the 25 best small-to-medium-sized companies to work for,

(including the recent Bangladesh factory that collapsed, killing more than a thousand people. Fashion is not always pretty. But Fisher is not in the fashion business. “We’re in the clothing business,” she says. “The word ‘fashion’ connotes fast-paced and planned obsolescence, the throwaway culture. That’s not me.” She spits on the thought. She’s sitting in the company’s design center, three floors on Fifth Avenue in the Flatiron district. With high ceilings, open spaces, and lots of natural light, each boutique is clothed in fabrics and clothing in various styles, patterns, mannequins, pictures of clothing throughout the day (her inspiration), glowing screens, and lots of people, mostly women. It’s a hive of creative activity.

Fisher settles her lanky, flowing frame into a comfy seat. She sits upright, statuesque, if statues could breathe and laugh. “Business as a movement” is also about how people work with each other. Fisher is shy, yet she exudes boundless energy. It’s a combination that makes her a perfect collaborator. She listens well and gives others room but will execute forcefully when the group has coalesced. “It can be chaotic,” she acknowledges, “but just the right amount of chaos is what breeds creativity. We want to hear voices from lots of different people. They’re engaged, give their opinion, then move on. A small team bears it all and makes the decision. It’s a balancing act. We often leave meetings with decisions unclear and just sit with them. We deliberately get on the feminine side—more intuitive, less linear. We consciously work on this collaboration. We have a deep sense that didn’t create this business alone. I listened, I heard, and we worked together. It would have been something different if I hadn’t worked in a collaborative way. That made it so much better.”

Irvingsong is less than an hour from the design center in Manhattan, yet it’s a world away. You pass through the mud and grime of Central Station, and before you know it, you’re reclusive from New York’s high tension. Clickety-clacking along, you see the Hudson River out the window to the left. In 45 minutes you’re in the village of Irvington. Crossing under the tracks, you’re in the parking lot of the Eileen Fisher Lab Store, where retail ideas are played with and tested. Next door, at 2 Ridge Street, into the headquarters.

I meet Cheryl Campbell, managing director of the Eileen Fisher lab.
The Eileen Fisher leadership program engages young women before they’re locked into conventional ways of seeing and being seen.

Community Foundation, whose main projects are a leadership institute, which operates a program to “foster leadership attributes” in younger girls, and Green Eileen, a recycled-clothing initiative. Both are housed a few blocks uphill in a ramshackle building with three-story columns designed in 1895 by Stanford White as the headquarters for Cosmopolitan.

First, Campbell shows me around the headquarters, which is loose and flowing, like the design center—and Eileen Fisher clothing. It has lots of open spaces where business can be done on the fly and eavesdropping is permitted. It’s where architects design the look and feel of the retail stores, where the highly successful web store is run, and where a miscellany of core functions and garment-industry specialties occur that are too arcane for my untrained eye to sort out.

Glass-rolled “duck-in” rooms with names like Delight and Creativity line the work areas. The large café space by the river is used by a local meditation group for weekly gatherings and special events. Wellness is central to the Eileen Fisher mission. Everyone has a wellness account they can use for massage, proper work wear, acupressure, yoga, and so forth. We pass a yoga/meditation room, a lactation room, massage rooms, and a patio where you can sit and watch the river roll by. At the same time, it’s clear that people are working very hard. The sense of ease does not breed a lack of commitment.

Over at the Stanford White building, Campbell and I visit the leadership institute, a warren of rooms where a 12-day training session for high-school girls is going on. In the first room, a dozen girls are intently working on creating a journal using digital publishing tools. I see topics like “how to let go of an unhealthy relationship” and “gratitude” on the pages they’re poring over. Nicole Pressly Wolf, a longtime publishing-industry professional, tells me it’s a delight to work with people whose ideas of life are still forming.

That’s Fisher’s mission here: to catch young women before they’re locked into conventional ways of seeing and being seen. “Women have so much to contribute, yet often lack confidence,” she says. “When I created the program five years ago, I asked myself, ‘What do I wish someone had told me when I was young? What extra help do girls need to move into leadership roles?’ It’s different for women today than when I was coming up, but the world is still fast-paced, with lots of verbal stuff thrown around. If you want to move through it with feeling and intuition, you need to be empowered to feel that it’s fine to do things that way.”

“How do you bring yourself to work, how are you doing, how are you affecting others? These are important things,” Eileen Fisher says. “And meditation can make you more conscious of those. It slows you down enough to stop and see what’s going on. If you want to change, you have to be able to slow down, stop, and shift. Otherwise, you may be efficient but you always do things the same, even if you need to consider changing.”
In another room, three groups of five girls each are cutting images out of magazines and making collages. They’re led by Leigh Thomas, who just finished her junior year at Brown and went through the program herself. The exercise is about stories, Thomas tells me. “They’re paying attention to what stories they’re told about themselves by the media. They’ll also be looking at what expectations are put on them by stories their peers tell them, as well as what expectations they place on others. Finally, they’ll consider what stories they want to tell the world about themselves and what steps forward they can take to make that happen.” The lesson that this exercise is happening in the former headquarters of Cosmo is not lost.

Snaking through hallways and up a rickety elevator, we come to a set of gray metal double doors. While we’re walking, Campbell has been telling me about a talk she attended almost a decade ago by William McDonough. He’s the author of Cradle to Cradle and The Upcycle, which promote the principle of treating what we’ve already manufactured as a vital resource, rather than always looking to extract more from a depleted Earth.

“What he was saying really turned me on,” Campbell told me. “It was back and excitedly shared with Eileen how I thought an upcycling effort would be a good fit for Eileen Fisher.” Eventually, Green Eileen was born. Loyal customers were asked to return garments they no longer used, with the knowledge that reselling them would support programs to “improve the lives of women and girls in our local and global communities.”

As the doors open, the fruits of that effort nearly tumble out into the hallway. Thousands of pieces of returned clothing jam the room. Goyzuetta, who heads up the collection operation, patiently sort through, evaluate, and classify the pieces. (Zack also works here—like mother, like son.) Many articles of clothing will be tagged and find their way to the Lab Store and two other outlets in Westchester. Some will be donated to shelters, and some are too threadbare for use. Their fate is under consideration. A second collection center in Seattle now supplies Green Eileen store there, and more outlets are planned.

Sales of recycled clothing through Green Eileen increased 50% this year, with the proceeds going to programs that improve the lives of women and girls.

“Sales increased almost 50% this year,” Campbell tells me. “It took 23 months to get Green Eileen to earn its first million, a year for the second million, and we just hit the third million after eight months. That’s a lot of upcycling!”

Eileen Fisher has known hard times. Hurricane Sandy inundated the company’s headquarters, which is still being restored, but Fisher is philosophical about what was lost in the flood. “It’s just stuff,” she said at the time. The company is not immune from the hardships of the marketplace either. While the designs are timeless, the core Eileen Fisher customer is aging, and that’s challenging the company to find younger customers while still adhering to the “Cradle to Cradle” principle. Fisher tells me that they can continue to “make design that belongs to this moment but transcends the moment” and appeal to a new generation of customers. There are early positive signs, but only time will tell.

People who work at Eileen Fisher generally share the company’s values and appeal to a new generation of customers. There are early positive signs.

Eileen Fisher advocates leadership skills they need to make design that belongs to this moment but transcends the moment.”

Leadership at Eileen Fisher is loose, more open to ambiguity and uncertainty. “It’s always moving and changing,” Jarreau tells me. “We say, ‘We’re in the river.’”

“Managing ambiguity is a tough thing for many people, who tend to want things more black and white. We don’t rely on a lot of policies and rules here, which is challenging. Our thrust is to help…
people cultivate good judgment, so they don’t have to use rules.”

When the 2008 financial collapse bit, sales dropped precipitously, which shook the mettle of the tight-knit, family-style business. Some people took early retirement, while others’ jobs had to be eliminated. “One of the first things we had to do was help people over the loss and grief,” Jarreau says. The whole organization was saddened, Jarreau says. The tough times occasioned the letting-go phase. “I give people my blessing. As we pass by dozens of women we’re walking out, there’s a lot of hubbub,” Hall says. “We’re looking industry partners to collaborate with us in a facility that would create raw fiber, spin it into yarn, weave it into fabric, and use it to make garments,” Hall says. “We’re seeking industry partners to collaborate with us in a facility that would create raw fiber, spin it into yarn, weave it into fabric, and use it to make garments.”

Next year marks Fisher’s 30th year in the clothing business. She says she’s “in the letting-go phase. I give people my blessing.”

Amy Hall is director of social consciousness. How many companies have one of those? Her mission is to help Eileen Fisher become the most socially and environmentally responsible company possible. It’s a many-faceted effort that includes initiatives such as the development of an organic cotton supply chain in Peru, helping a Chinese silk dyer use fewer chemicals and less water, and investing in two windmills in Iowa through Native Energy. Many of these efforts are chronicled through the Amperian marketing project. When a customer sees the “A,” she knows she can go to a website and learn more about how Eileen Fisher products come into being, and what the company is doing to be responsible and innovative by watching videos or reading interviews and journalistic-style reports from the front.

“We’ve been collecting these stories for quite a while,” Hall says. “Eileen was reluctant to share them. She wanted us doing good things for the right reasons, not to overtly publicize her goodness in order to sell clothes. But now we see that many customers, particularly those age 40 and under, are value-driven and want to know the story behind the products they buy.”

Hall is focused now on two major projects. The first is to create a publicly available map of Eileen Fisher’s entire supply chain, an enormous undertaking. “Where we encounter social and environmental problems,” Hall says, “we will work with our suppliers to help rectify them—through relationship-building, investment, and partnership,” if a serious problem can’t be resolved, they’ll halt production until something can be worked out.

The other initiative is even more ambitious: a sustainable way to bring clothing manufacturing back to the U.S. It starts with a proposal to develop a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility in the Bronx. It would rely on used fiber and a facility alone,” Hall says. “We’re seeking industry partners to collaborate with us in a facility that would create raw fiber, spin it into yarn, weave it into fabric, and use it to make garments.”

“Eileen Fisher is Editor-in-Chief Mindful as seen in… MINDFUL - DECEMBER 2013

Some day, Fisher says, the plan may be used to turn over the entire company to its employees. She also loves spending time with her children. “She took both of them with her to Clinton visit factories and see how the workers there lived. Her 20-year-old daughter, Sinta, is a window into a younger world, and perhaps the next generation of loyal customers. “She goes through our show and digs old things and does new fun things with them. I wouldn’t have thought of,” Fisher says.

As we enter the conference room, Fisher invites me to accompany her to dinner with people from the meditation group that uses space in Irvington. As we’re walking out, there’s a lot of hubbub. “It’s market week, when buyers come to look at the new line. Fisher has seen it for the first time that day. She gives it her blessing. As we pass by dozens of women looking at the new clothes, she quietly slides by on the periphery, almost unnoticed. When she is spotted, warm hallways are shouted. She steps briskly, smile broad, and moves, not wanting to become the center of attention.

No entourage accompanies us as we leave the building. In the elevator, Fisher and a counselor share stories about their children. “I love the idea of the restaurant, her attention is on her companion, not her iPhone, even though she’s been off of touch for hours. In the restaurant, someone mentions one of the latest fashion trends, something about T-shirts. Everyone looks to Fisher for comment. “I don’t know,” she says, setting of a swishiness of laughter. But it’s notatarious. Eileen Fisher has never been about the latest fad. Her line is timeless, and for many people, it couldn’t come at a better time.”