

Rethinking Sustainable Practices Across The Fashion Industry

by **Natalie Viasoumi** | Oct. 19, 2018



Positive Luxury conference addressed sustainability from a variety of perspectives - be it retail, manufacturing, design and the treatment of models. Brands such as Hermès showcased their 360 approach to move forward.

It's been a few years that the fashion and luxury industries have started paying attention to sustainability, but as issues of the environmental and social impact of the sector continue to come to the forefront, there is now a pressing need for change.

Positive Luxury, a London-based organization which promotes the most sustainable luxury businesses through its Butterfly Mark initiative, highlighted this growing demand for companies to rethink their practices and adopt a more sustainable approach across all areas of their businesses, during a conference held in London.

During the event the speakers, which included jeweler Stephen Webster, model Arizona Muse, Hermès chief sustainability officer Pierre-Alexandre Bapst and Miller Harris' chief executive officer Sarah Rotheram among others, addressed sustainability from a variety of perspectives - be it retail, manufacturing, design and the treatment of models. They showcased that to move forward and create a sustainable future, a 360 approach is required, as well as transparent communication across every pillar of a business.

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Hermès reduced its waste by 15%

"Sustainability will be non-negotiable for Generation Z," said Daniella Vega, director of sustainability at Selfridges.

There has been particular momentum around the issue of waste produced by fashion labels, following the backlash Burberry recently faced for burning old stock.

Vega added that the new generations will no longer tolerate waste and are now expecting the brands they consume to also be advocates for social good - so becoming sustainable is also a means of staying relevant, for brands and retailers alike.

Bapst spoke about how Hermès is working to reduce its waste by improving its cutting ratios and spearheading different initiatives such as the "Petit H" scheme, where the label's artisans create different leather objects using leftover materials. So far, the company has succeeded to reduce its waste by 15 percent over the past three years.

Hermès, has also aligned its sustainability mission with the brand's values and broader business model of creating longevity through quality, so nurturing its artisans and training the new generation, corporate responsibility and working culture have been top priorities. "We have more than 4,000 artisans making products with their hands everyday, 95 percent of them having had no leather training prior to joining Hermès - we train them directly," explained Bapst.

At Miller Harris, newly appointed chief executive officer Sarah Rotheram has been working towards refining the brand's strategy to become more sustainable. Rotheram highlighted plans to wrap Christmas products in 100 percent silk scarves, using recycled and recyclable packaging, and offering hard soaps rather than gel ones, to eliminate the need for bottles.

Reusable sterling silver straw

For Stephen Webster, design and creativity can be utilized as tools through which to address worldwide issues, such as that of waste, sparking consumers' appetite for conversation and meaningful products.

Earlier this year, he designed "The Last Straw" a reusable sterling silver straw that made a statement about the effect of plastic on the planet and aimed at encouraging consumers to reduce their use of plastic straws.

"It was intended to ignite debate, to ignite a bit of anger about the plastic waste we've contributed as a society so far - and we had people coming into the store for the first time because of it," said Webster, who gave 10 percents of the sales proceeds to the Plastic Oceans Foundation. "It's about giving your customers as many tools as possible to live sustainably."

As companies look to adjust their supply chains and improve their environmental impact, they also need to consider the costs such changes bring, as the bottom line will ultimately always be the top priority for any organization.

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Need for transparency

Desirée Bollier, chair and global chief merchant of the outlet chain Value Retail, addressed the issue saying that the challenge is maintaining a balance between the need for expansion in emerging markets, which are filled with fashion-hungry consumers, and doing so in a sustainable manner to satisfy millennials' need for transparency.

For, Mark Ferguson, partner and co-chief investment officer of Generation Investment Management - known as a sustainable investment firm - capitalism and sustainability can co-exist, provided that companies are prepared to cover the costs.

"We need to tackle the challenges of sustainability - and then work out how to pay for them. There are costs involved," said Ferguson, adding that it's an investment worth standing behind, if companies want to stay in business in the long-term and to gain the approval of modern-day consumers. "It's an uncomfortable thing for directors to think about, but we're seeing a lot more transparency and a change in voice via the internet and social media. There's a very fine time period that companies have to get their act together and vocalise what they're doing, before the consumer conversation gets even louder. To make a great investment long-term, you really have to be incorporating sustainability into the framework."

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