

CREATING A MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE APPAREL BUSINESS

POLICIES FOR APPAREL BRANDS AND RETAILERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When browsing many apparel brands' and retailers' web sites or catalogs, it would be easy to get the idea that the way to lessen the impacts the apparel and retailing industries have on the environment is simply to start using organic cotton in a portion of each brand's or store's product offerings. But you probably know that it's not quite as simple as that. We've heard numerous brands and retailers over the last year say that they want their businesses to be sustainable but that they don't really know what that means. Further, they are afraid to talk about what they are doing because their critics will not believe it is enough.

The University of Delaware's Sustainable Apparel Initiative (UDSAI)¹ worked this year to develop a set of policies related to environmental sustainability that would begin to provide answers for the following questions:

- What does it mean to be a “sustainable” apparel business?
- What must a company do to call itself “sustainable”?

UDSAI defines sustainability as encompassing social, environmental, and financial aspects of a company. Sustainability is the result of responsible business practices and policies that make a positive impact on all people in the value chain from workers to consumers, maintain the environment for future generations, and result in a more productive and viable company. Thus, to be a sustainable apparel business means a company embraces a vision that includes sustainability and that it does the hard work of achieving that vision.

While sustainability is three-dimensional, in this document we focus on the environmental dimension of the term, narrowing our focus to business practices and policies that result in “environmental sustainability.” UD faculty and students collaborated with industry professionals involved with environmental sustainability to research best practices. We focused our work on environmental sustainability as it relates to apparel products and the processes involved in the direct supply chain of production. We reviewed hundreds of documents and web sites on environmental sustainability and have developed 10 policies that, if followed, will make the apparel and retailing industries more sustainable. Some of the policies are easy ones that apparel brands and retailers of all sizes can implement quickly and at little cost. Other policies describe practices that are more costly and require long-term strategic planning to carry out.

WE PROPOSE THAT APPAREL BRANDS AND RETAILERS:

1. Follow all accepted national and international safety and environmental regulations to protect workers and consumers.
2. Require all suppliers and vendors to have measurable goals and objectives around environmental sustainability.
3. Eliminate waste in all points of the supply chain.
4. Understand and reduce carbon emission in sourcing, production, retailing, and use.
5. Consider and implement end-of-life strategies (recycle, renew, or reuse) when choosing materials, designing, and producing apparel.
6. Eliminate excess product manufacturing by balancing supply to demand.
7. Include environmental sustainability as part of training, education, and evaluation programs for employees, suppliers, and customers.
8. Communicate the corporate environmental sustainability identity internally and externally.
9. Develop and implement advertising and marketing strategies that avoid greenwashing.
10. Implement an “ACL” approach. When a mistake is made, ‘A’dmit it, ‘C’orrect it, and ‘L’earn from it.

In this report, each policy is listed, and the rationale for following it is presented along with examples of companies that are successfully implementing the policy.

¹ The University of Delaware Sustainable Apparel Initiative promotes environmental sustainability and social responsibility in the apparel and retail industries. Established in 2008 by the Department of Fashion and Apparel Studies in partnership with key industry partners, UDSA I leverages the department's extensive expertise in apparel and textiles sustainability and social responsibility, consumer behavior, and apparel design to research, design, create, and demonstrate a framework of guidelines, practices, programs, and solutions to shape the character of the apparel and retailer industries in their evolution toward sustainability. We aim for our work to have positive economic, environmental, and social benefits for the world and its people.

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SUSTAINABLE APPAREL INITIATIVE

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ABOUT US: CO-DIRECTORS

Dr. Huantian Cao Associate Professor, EMAIL hcao@udel.edu

Professor Martha Carper Assistant Professor, EMAIL carperms@udel.edu

Kelly Cobb Instructor, EMAIL kcobb@udel.edu

An initiative of the University of Delaware's Department of Fashion & Apparel Studies

Dr. Marsha Dickson Professor and Chairperson, EMAIL dickson@udel.edu

POLICY CONTRIBUTORS



Huantian Cao Associate Professor, The University of Delaware

Martha Carper Assistant Professor, The University of Delaware

Kelly Cobb Instructor, The University of Delaware

Marsha Dickson Professor and Chairperson, The University of Delaware

Rick Horwath Vice President, Solutions Business Development & Marketing, Bureau Veritas, Consumer Products Services

Hye-Shin Kim Associate Professor, The University of Delaware

Steve Lamar Executive Vice President, American Apparel and Footwear Association

Sharron Lennon Irma Ayers Professor, The University of Delaware

Suzanne Loker Professor Emerita, Cornell University

Rick MacDonald Considered Apparel Lead, Nike, Inc.

Jennifer McCord University Honors Program, Russell Fellow, The University of Delaware

Will Phillips Manager of Corporate Environmental Strategy, Under Armour Performance

Jenna Shaw Undergraduate Honors Student, Double major: Apparel Design and Fashion Merchandising, The University of Delaware



Department of Fashion and Apparel Studies, Newark, DE 19716 USA

PHONE (302) 831-8714 EMAIL fashion-studies@udel.edu WEBSITE <http://www.sai.udel.edu/>