

Editorial

Good Citizenship in the Textile and Apparel Industry

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It may come as no surprise that the theme of this editorial makes reference to sustainability. It is after all one of the burning issues facing the textile and apparel sector Ozek [1] and is connected to social, cultural, ecological, economic and political dimensions on a global scale [2]. The attitude shift of businesses is similarly noteworthy with the rapid and widespread adoption and declaration of sustainable policies, not least as part of a reconsidered approach to supply chain decision [3]. The influence of this can be seen at all levels of the business, with global fast-fashion super-power H&M [4] and Zara [5] establishing strategies that are intended to impact upon all aspects of its business from procurement and manufacturing to creating opportunities for consumer recycling. Similarly, niche players such as G-Star [6] and Nudie Jeans [7] declare their sustainable credentials through selectivity in raw materials and supply chain and an advocacy for extended garment usage as a counter culture to fast-fashion.

As an early advocate of the 'at every stage' mind-set, Marks & Spencer established its all encompassing Plan A strategy in 2007, describing it as a 'sustainable business programme, intended to encourage a rounded scrutiny of the business – food as well as fashion and textiles [8].

The remit was broad, but the agenda clear; to create a better and more sustainable business. Subsequently, decisions addressed not only product dimensions but also transport and energy dimensions – the most public of which (at least on British roads) remains the improved aerodynamics of its goods fleet.

The reason I isolate Plan A as significant to shaping this mind-set is three-fold. The first was the scale of the business making this behavioural change. While the pursuit of a more sustainable culture and therefore more sustainable systems / processes must be the concern of all businesses – small, medium and large – the greatest traction and therefore the greatest impact is likely to be achieved through change in large scale businesses, partly because of the breadth and depth of its influence upon systems and products but also because of its ability to reach, inform and influence customers. The second is because of its strategic comprehensiveness and centrality to decision making within the business and wider impact should be part of the consideration process. The third dimension relates to term sustainable business programme. This is without doubt a neat turn of phrase that comfortably encompasses the idea of environmental sustainability and business sustainability.

Extending the concept of sustainable businesses forces us to think about business decisions, strategies and behaviours and how they shape enduring businesses that have longevity. Under this umbrella we should therefore consider how we manage all resources, not just those that impact upon the environment, but also those that impact upon humankind. There is a danger that, in emphasising the intensity of the environmental impact of fashion, apparel and textiles we concentrate upon the depletion and degradation of material resources and the impact of such upon the planet and marginalise the human dimensions, be they social, economic or political.

In this respect, I would argue that the pursuit of businesses should be the goal of good citizenship based upon how we treat the world, its resources and its peoples. This does not undermine idea of competition, but it does set the behavioural bar high in respect of how we compete. Such a principled stance, it may be argued, is unrealistic, as there will always be the risk of the competitive free-rider – the individual or organisation that behaves unilaterally for self-gain. Assuming however the principles of good citizenship, in a competitive environment characterised this is likely to be a short-term strategy as other good citizens (both B-2-B and C-2-B) will cease to trade with wayward parties. If profit is based upon good business done well then the incentive to do good considerably becomes intensified.

There may be insufficient evidence that all textile and apparel consumers are equally motivated to seek out businesses that are conscientious across all dimensions but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that at least some are and that this number is growing. It may also be that the recent economic narrative has encouraged consumers to re-evaluate their personal consumption behaviours both in terms of spend and in terms of frequency. There are nevertheless indications of a shifting attitude, be it triggered by finance or conscience. The important issue is that there is an opportunity within the sector to affect real and large-scale change that is to the benefit of all and that can simultaneously deliver sustainable and profitable businesses.

North-American fashion brand, Eileen Fisher, expresses this effectively, claiming to be a triple bottom line business [9] that measures success in terms of people, the planet and profit. This is a standpoint shared with other like-minded B-Corp business (in excess of 2100 at the time of writing). The underlying ethos of B-Corp is that success and respect can be mutually deliverable and mutually beneficial. B-Corp is fundamentally about good citizenship Eileen Fisher and other organisations in the B-Corp community all strive to be successful, but they recognise that success can have a variety of dimensions. Successful businesses make good choices (recognising in this context the moral dimension of good as well as the effective dimension) and that good choices can bring about corporate, cultural, economic, scientific and social good. It is essentially good business done well.

One final thought. The emphasis of this editorial discourse has been placed upon business. There is good reason for this. Business is the arena in which change is most publically acted out, be that through

the interaction of business with other businesses or businesses with consumers. We, however, as an academic and research community also have a critical role to play in shaping the future, especially the long-term future. It is research that will enhance our understanding of the challenges facing the sector. It is, to stress but three, science, engineering and design that will evolve the solutions that facilitate change. And it is education that will shape the minds of the next generation. Good citizenship is a concept without boundaries.

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