Empowering sustainable sourcing in fashion

Environmental awareness continues to rise to the fore and impact buying decisions. According to the **Global Sustainability Study 2021**, 85% of respondents indicate that in the past five years, they have shifted their purchase behavior towards being more sustainable.

As consumers exercise their power and voice through the products they buy, the result is an inexorable acceleration of fashion away from the current fast-fashion paradigm to a less wasteful alternative that is better described as "accurate" fashion.

Towards sustainability

What is accurate fashion? In terms of outcomes, it's about having the right clothes appear in front of the right customers, while producing them in a way that every line of clothing sells out with little or nothing left over. This is the opposite of the popular approach of churning out profligate quantities of garments and flooding the market with a smorgasbord of designs to see what sticks.

The increasing use of technology in garment manufacturing and more demanding consumers are forcing the fashion industry to react at a faster pace than ever. The pressure is only increased as the current pandemic percolates around the globe, causing widespread disruption in supply chains. To survive, the industry must revamp old business processes and consider new ways of producing.

The twin pressures of change and an increased focus on sustainability makes it logical to focus on embedding sustainability into the next wave of fashion products. Yet as anyone who has done it will attest, sustainability is far more complex than swapping an existing material with a new type of fabric.

Sustainability—not an add-on option

Genuine sustainability starts during the sourcing stage—ideally before design work starts. As it is, incorporating sustainability from the get-go makes for a much easier process, as opposed to trying to shoehorn it in retroactively. This is because sustainability in fashion is not so much a feature but revolves around an intricate blend of materials and labour for a final product that is made with a minimum of carbon footprint—and is recyclable.

One linchpin of sustainability and fast fashion revolves around the choice of manufacturers and suppliers who will commit to accepted environmental practices and regulations. Suppliers that are in proximity to each other and the target market helps, too, because they can offer both faster reaction times and a lower carbon footprint for shipping. An equally important consideration would be the ethical sourcing of labour, which includes factors such as non-exploitative wages and humane working conditions. Finally, the appropriate recyclable fabric will need to be identified and utilised in new designs.

When the dust settles, brands that are serious about sustainable fashion must treat it as an end-to-end process that begins long before the first garment rolls off the production line—and ends only when the item is recycled. Supporting recycling efforts mean that avenues to recycle worn garments at the end of their lifespans should be offered, and the requisite information on the makeup of fabrics should be accessible.

Digitising the backend

Tracking all these variables is challenging work, more so as production lead times are shortened to keep pace with accurate fashion. A modern enterprise resource planning (ERP) system has an important role in ensuring visibility not just in the production of new garments, but also to track raw materials, suppliers, and the composition of each garment that rolls off the factory floor. The latter is vital, as the sophistication of modern materials means that the tracking of constituents for each garment goes a long way to facilitate downstream recycling initiatives.

Moreover, an ERP system is a vital building block for handling the plethora of style and non-style items in a modern production line and ensuring that production is performed in the most efficient way possible. From planning to automated forecasting, digital systems are required to ensure that products produced are not only sustainable but quickly produced to meet the ebb and flow of fashion tastes.

A strong digital backend is also essential for the future, as retailers and brands experiment with various ways of getting products to consumers. From pop-up stores that cater to specific fashion trends, to experimental pre-production products for gauging market response before entering full production, an ERP system is essential to meet the fluid and rapidly evolving needs of consumers.

Ultimately, an ERP system lets garment manufacturers react faster to changes in fashion, while empowering sustainability. With superior tracking of source materials, minimum inventory, and fewer wastages, this is a win for sustainable fashion.

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