

Demand Enhancement Ingredient: The New Sustainability

Jeffrey Silberman

If you accept the fact that the cotton customers are constantly emerging—and that a reasonable representation of their opinions and preferences is communicated through what they wear—then you need to be in touch with what fashion and textile designers think. They are the ones who will translate the cotton message to the consuming public, and ultimately will affect market share. They can carry the flag that helps you rise to prominence, but they also carry the shovels that can bury you.

And so what are the emerging fabric and fashion developers and designers—the ones who are enrolled in fashion and textile programs—thinking about? They are thinking about sustainability, which won't surprise you, but they are thinking about it more holistically. To them, sustainability isn't a noun, but a participle: they are thinking of *improving* processes, *rethinking* policies, or *creating* and *incorporating* better ethical values into ways of doing business. They want to learn more about *better practices*, and they are demanding that sustainability be infused into their educational curricula. Sometimes these students expect information from their instructors, who may not understand it themselves, but they want information on sustainability, and they want it to be accurate.

What I gleaned from a round table discussion that I recently participated in at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York is that sustainability permeates students' lives, and they demand not only that their education keep pace, but that industry keep pace as well, if it wants this generation to buy their products. Their feelings go well beyond textile fibers, and include paper usage, water consumption, technology, power, social responsibility, and everything else that touches their lives.

There is a bit of a backlash going on with today's 20-30 something-year-olds in this area. The students I work with are past the idea that the label *certified organic* means the same thing as *sustainable*. They are now very sensitive and suspicious of *green washing*, expecting that they need to explore beyond the text before they can believe the label. They won't go so far as to blindly embrace biotechnology in cotton, but they do recognize the conundrum: "tampering with nature" can produce various widely used

products that can benefit us by consuming less water, improving yields, and possibly alleviating poverty. Blind idealism is gone, serious investigation has arrived. These students want to have the conversations.

They are wondering about the *true cost* of items, and are drilling down to issues, including subsidies. They now ask how the distortion of world prices through government interventions really impact the marketplace, and whether the price they pay represents the *real cost*. Small idealistic companies with high-minded values that trash anything not organic—expecting that their army of consuming followers will pay a 20% premium—are *out*, and large companies like Levi's who go out of their way to try to make a difference at a reasonable cost are admired, and are most definitely *in*.

Polyester continues to evade its petroleum parentage, despite being a non-renewable and polluting substance, but it is not home free. All plastic is suspect, especially when it is not recycled (or recyclable); water bottles are always a predictable target, always in view. At the ICAC Plenary Meeting in Buenos Aires, there was mention that the chemical industries are beginning to experience internal attacks by those touting the use of recycled polyester versus virgin polyester—a controversy akin to the organic and conventional cotton disputes of the last decade. To judge from the tone of the discussions, there is evidence that this disagreement is or will be occurring.

The cotton industry has shown bold leadership in embracing sustainability and better practices through technology in agriculture, but also by employing initiatives that reach forward throughout the entire supply chain. It's time to show bold leadership in letting the world know about these improvements. While supply and price must be in order, that won't be enough if demand continues to wane. The way to begin is to designate someone within the organization to focus on demand enhancement, to communicate improvements in sustainability, but the next step is to support those efforts as a priority.

This is not window dressing. This topic has become core to your business. Company by company and country by country, small efforts will cumulatively generate large results, and the International Forum for Cotton Promotion (IFCP) can help you develop and amplify those results.

As the sustainability round table at FIT came to a close, the emerging fashion and fabric designers made it very clear that they are the *native* population, and the older generation is the *immigrant* population when it

comes to communication. These fledgling business people grew up communicating digitally, and that's what they expect. They believe in being good corporate citizens, and they expect that from others in the industry as well. What is news here is that they are in the driver's seat and are perfectly happy to turn their attention to those who "get it", while turning away from those who don't.

Jeffrey Silberman is the Chairperson of the Textile Development and Marketing Department at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City and the Executive Director of the International Forum for Cotton Promotion (IFCP).