

UNWRAPPING Sustainability

If every era has its catchphrase, then sustainability surely must be today's. The recent sustainability seminar hosted by RMIT and supported by the Council of Textile & Fashion Industries of Australia (TFIA), looked behind the buzzword to provide a refreshingly critical look at the challenges and successes it entails, writes Belinda Smart.

Taking place on October 20 as part of RMIT's public lecture series and titled 'Leading Global Retailers – working in fibre sustainability', the seminar offered a summation of current challenges and successes in the pursuit of fibre sustainability. The audience heard first from Paula Rogers, industry liaison at the Council of Textile & Fashion Industries of Australia (TFIA); then from Phoebe Croyle, marketing manager of The Merino Company and Tracy Mak, environmental manager of furnishing textile and sustainability specialist Instyle. Paula Rogers has 25 years in international supply chain. While living and working

in Hong Kong (from 1995 to 2003), she specialised in ethical trade and corporate social responsibility, overseeing 6,000 factories in 80 countries for some of the world's largest retailers. Titled 'What in the world is going on in fibre sustainability?' Rogers' RMIT presentation provided a unique perspective on some of the key issues inherent in fashion and textile companies' reliance on cotton. Aside from the toll taken on the environment through the use of pesticides to boost cotton yields, rising prices comprised a major challenge, Rogers contended; recent disasters such as the flooding in Pakistan had driven up the price of cotton, but it was unlikely prices would drop back even when supply returned to normal, due to increased demand and limited supply.

As a result, she said, major overseas retailers like Marks & Spencer, Walmart, and C&A had been moving towards certified cotton options such as Organic, Fairtrade or Transition cotton, as much to secure supply as to embrace sustainability. Nearer to home, innovative companies such as Aussiebum, which recently launched underwear made from banana fibre mixed with cotton and elastane, were looking for ways to reduce their reliance on cotton.

Speaking to AT&F magazine after the seminar, Rogers said the writing was on the wall for local players dependent on cotton.

"Here in Australia, we haven't felt the fibre price increase yet because our dollar is strong and has absorbed the cost increase. But once the dollar drops, we'll start to see it. The days of the \$5 or \$10 RRP cotton





T-shirt are numbered."

Citing Kate Fletcher's book, 'Sustainable Fashion & Textiles', it was clear that reliance on cotton was unsustainable, she added.

"Cotton and polyester combined make up 80 per cent of the current fibre used to make textiles and fashion globally. As developing countries' middle classes grow, demand for more textiles will also grow. We need to find ways to diversify into other fibres to share the load of the burgeoning market."

From cotton to wool fibre, The Merino Company (TMC)'s RMIT presentation, from TMC marketing manager Phoebe Croyle, outlined the centrality of transparent supply in TMC's unique service. An Australian-based business supplying certified and traceable natural fibre, textile and apparel solutions from Sheep to Shelf (S2S) for leading retailers and brands globally, the company works with over 400 wool growers, marketing and selling their wool through targeted customer programs. Two TMC labels, Nué and ZeroCO2, were making serious inroads into the sustainable fibre market, Croyle said.

"The first, derived from the acronym NUE (natural, untouched and ethical) is a brand developed by TMC offering many different permutations, each of which caters to specific demand. ZeroCO2 is TMC's carbon offset brand."

The biggest coup for TMC in recent times, and a first for Australia, comprised a three year contract with the world's largest suit retailer, Aoyama of Japan, for the supply

of Balanced ZeroCO2 Wool that would enable Aoyama to create and market a zero carbon footprint suit. At the time of writing, Aoyama representatives were scheduled to visit Australia in early November for an official contract signing at the TMC office in Melbourne, followed by a tree-planting ceremony at the rural property of Andrew Duffy, a supplier to the contract who runs a carbon offset program.

Finally, from suiting to seating, Instyle, the third presenter at RMIT's seminar, also had strong links to sustainable wool fibre. An Australian company started 20 years ago and specialising in interior and furnishing fabrics targeting architects, interior designers and furniture manufacturers, Instyle is now a byword for sustainable textiles.

Instyle's Tracey Mak opened her RMIT presentation by recalling that her arrival at the company in 2002, in the newly created role of environmental manager, coincided with the outset of Instyle's "sustainable journey", with sales staff reporting that demand was increasingly dictating the integration of sustainability into Instyle's offering.

"For the past eight years, this is what we have been focusing on," Mak explained. "We started with easy measures such as recycling, which allowed us to reduce 80 per cent of our waste and 50 per cent of our waste management costs. We also implemented a packaging re-design, which resulted in savings on packaging waste." From such beginnings, the company is



now regarded as a leader in sustainability across all categories and had won numerous environmental awards. Among its achievements in textile innovation, Instyle created and designed complete specifications for LIFE (Low Impact For the Environment) textiles. Sourcing eco-wool from TMC, the product required minimum processing and adhered to strict sustainability criteria.

"Recycled polyester (PET) was the only option eight years ago. However, it uses harmful chemicals including antimony and formaldehyde and there's no recycling infrastructure in Australia."

By contrast, LIFE Textiles used select natural fibres, locally manufactured to strict environmental criteria. In addition to LIFE's stringent production criteria, natural products such as wool fibre also came with self-evident advantages, Mak said.

"The great thing about this product is that it's durable; wool actually looks better as it ages. It's also a valuable fire retardant as well as being bio-degradable. The result is that LIFE textiles are our highest selling product."

Significantly, Instyle chose not to certify its LIFE Textiles collection, because there was no textile lifecycle-based standard available, Mak explained.

"The only textile standard available in Australia was from Good Environmental Choice Australia (GECA). The GECA Textile Standard was not lifecycle based; its only aim was to minimise waste water pollution. GECA's Textile Standard does not address raw material extraction; energy, water or waste; nor recyclability or biodegradability"

"Textiles made from virgin acrylic, polyester, PVC and nylon can achieve GECA certification and Instyle did not want its LIFE Textiles, which were designed to go beyond the GECA Textile Standard, to carry the same 'environmental tick' as another fabric made from virgin acrylic and polyester."

Instead, for the past few years, Mak explained, Instyle had been working with the American textile industry, Green Blue and NSF International on the development of the Sustainable Textile Standard, which is lifecycle based. This standard is due to be finalised by next year.

Another Instyle program, Etheco, was named for its combination of ethics and the environment. Working with Instyle, former CSIRO scientist Dr Jim Watts developed a Merino breed with softer, more flexible skin and less wrinkles and folds. The absence of skin corrugations ensured the animals were not at risk of developing flystrike and therefore did not need to be mulesed like traditional Merino breeds. Meanwhile, Instyle's Farm to Fabric program and associated online tool enabled the company's clients to trace the fibre used in any given Instyle range back to its original source.

Sharing Instyle's expertise via the RMIT seminar reflected the importance of collaboration between industry and education in driving the sustainability debate, Mak said.

"Instyle has a genuine commitment to drive real environmental change. By sharing information, we hope to inspire and encourage other companies to pursue sustainability."

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