

## sustainability with style

by Tracy Mak

*Established by Michael Fitzsimons in 1987, Instyle Contract Textiles was created with a vision to build an internationally respected textile company. Michael has been a strong supporter of the Centre's National Small to Medium Enterprise Project. In particular, he has donated his time to participate in focus groups for the Good Business Register and has joined the Centre on panels at conferences. Holistic, practical and no-nonsense are words that describe Instyle's approach to sustainability, writes Tracy Mak.*

Textile company Instyle's sustainability journey began in 2002 at a company conference. Our clients – architects and interior designers – began asking for green furnishing fabrics and our sales team sought to meet this demand. Our Managing Director, Michael Fitzsimons, doesn't do anything halfheartedly and decided to adopt a 'whole of company' approach to sustainability. This decision required significant investment and commitment: a new position had to be created as the company did not have the resources or knowledge required.

Like many companies, we started by picking the low hanging fruit. There were no sophisticated technologies, just simple, practical and easy-to-implement initiatives. By using less and recycling, the cost savings were instant. For example, reducing the thickness of our transport packaging achieved cost savings of 20% and sending waste to landfill is two to three times more expensive than recycling.

Initially there was some resistance to changing "the way things are done around here". When we looked at reducing the weight of packaging plastic to reduce the overall impact of our transport packaging, warehouse staff feared this would provide less protection and the fabric could get damaged in transport.

This kind of concern was overcome by open communication. For instance in this case, we surveyed our fabric manufacturers about their packaging to find out how we could provide the same level of protection as before but by using plastic that was thinner than our own. We shared this information with the warehouse staff who were then satisfied because their priorities could also be met.

After discussions with the team – proposing ideas, gaining feedback and addressing any concerns – we could then work towards a solution that met all of our objectives: delivering fabrics safely and reducing our impact at the same time. Plus, we have always had strong leadership. This has resulted in sustainability becoming integrated into the culture of Instyle, where it is everyone's responsibility to achieve environmental goals.

One of our goals was to develop a benchmark sustainable textile collection. It took us two years to research and develop the LIFE Sustainable Textiles® collection. It became the first sustainable textile in Australia to have minimal impact over the whole lifecycle. The fabrics are made locally from locally grown eco-wool (low pesticide wool) and they are recyclable.

This was totally different to what our competitors were doing – importing fabrics made from plastic bottle waste which still contained hazardous substances and could not be recycled here in Australia. As a result, LIFE Textiles® has become Instyle's most successful product range.

In 2008 we were presented with an opportunity to further improve LIFE Textiles® when we met with Dr Jim Watts, a former CSIRO scientist who had developed a unique selective breeding system (SRS®) for merino sheep. SRS merino sheep are 'wrinkle-free', therefore they are naturally resistant to flystrike and don't require mulesing\*. Soon after that meeting, we visited some SRS farms in Wellington NSW, where through holistic farm management and sheep farming with minimal or zero pesticides, fertilisers and herbicides were regenerating and improving the land.

After seeing the difference between adjacent degraded, conventional farmlands, and thriving, holistic farmlands we decided to source wool from non-mulesed sheep raised on holistically-managed farms. We have termed this EthEco® wool, because it combines both ethical and environmental considerations.

Consequently, Instyle has won numerous environmental awards such as the United Nations' World Environment Day Awards and the NSW Government Green Globe Awards. These have lifted our company profile.



Instyle has become regarded as a leader in sustainability but only because our efforts are genuine. We are committed to real environmental change that goes beyond our organisation. For several years, we have challenged current industry practices and standards such as the Green Building Council and the Good Environmental Choice Australia (GECA) which reward 'business as usual' practices.

As a small-to-medium business with a lone voice, it's been an uphill battle but this has resulted in small signs of improvement within the textiles and building and interiors industries. Going the extra mile requires great commitment. Sustainability has given the company a sense of collective purpose and has made us more passionate in what we do. We have also enjoyed closer relationships with our supply chain and increased customer loyalty. Sustainability is good business practice for the future.

*Tracy Mak is Environmental Manager at Instyle Contract Textiles.*

\* Mulesing is the practice of removing skin from a sheep's hindquarters. Most merino sheep in Australia are mulesed and without it, these sheep are highly susceptible to flystrike.