

freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are respected; working conditions are safe and hygienic; child labour shall not be used; living wages are paid; working hours are not excessive.

Environmental issues

Environmental issues covered on the websites of our selected retailers include climate change, energy consumption, waste management and recycling, water consumption, distribution emissions and environmental certification.

Next recognises it has a responsibility to work towards minimising the direct impact of its business operations on the environment both now and in the future. Through the development and operation of good business practices we continue to work to reduce our environmental impacts by reducing the carbon intensity of our activities and the natural resources we use. More specifically, the company claims to be focusing on three key operational activities, namely energy use in stores, warehouses, distribution centres and offices, fuel consumption in the distribution of products, and waste generated throughout the supply chain.

■ In a brief statement of its environmental policy, Matalan not only recognises its responsibility to minimise the problems of creating harm to the environment but also claims to sustain and improve the environment through the careful consideration of design, selection of materials and operational procedures.

Employee welfare

A number of the retailers reports on their workplace commitments to their employees. Here the general argument is that caring for staff is essential to the continuing success and growth of the company:

■ TK Maxx claims to provide equal employment opportunities to all qualified applicants and associates in all aspects of employment without regard to race, colour, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity and expression, marital status, military status, political beliefs or any other legally protected status.

■ Some of the retailers provide information about their impact on, or their contribution to, the communities in which they operate and on their charitable donations. The Arcadia Group, for example, claims to be 'highly committed to playing a valuable role in the community – both locally and globally.'

Public information

A survey within stores revealed that little information on sustainability issues was publicly displayed. Six of the stores surveyed, namely the Arcadia Group, New



A garment factory in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, China

Look, Matalan, BHS, Penneys and Aurora Fashion, had no information on sustainability and information in the other four stores was limited.

■ The Primark stores had three small notices which read 'Primark is committed to monitoring and positively improving the conditions of the people who make products for us.'

■ In Next, 'Care 4 Care' bags had a label which read 'I am made from 12 recycled plastic bottles woven together with beautiful natural jute. Care 4 Care by using me instead of a plastic bag.'

■ Marks and Spencer had a number of posters promoting the company's commitment to fair trade, to two charities, to a clothing recycling initiative with Oxfam and details of its commitments to reduce packaging waste.

Where does the power lie?

What, then is the role of retailers and customers in reducing negative social and environmental impacts within the supply chain?

Customers

Businesses are driven by the demands of their customers and it can be argued that major changes in the clothing supply chain will only occur if they are driven by consumer choice. There is evidence that consumers are increasingly concerned about sustainability, but it is not clear that this influences the decisions they make about which clothes to buy. Consumers may want to make choices based on sustainability but, in practice, price may be a much more powerful factor.

and the buyers who impart the clothes. It can be difficult to monitor the ethical procedures of all the players in these chains.

Trends in an affluent society

Shop till you drop

The leading retailers are competing with one another to drive down prices, and this allows consumers to buy more clothes than ever before. Not only are prices ever more competitive, but the 'fast-fashion' format depends on rapid design and manufacture to bring new and constantly changing fashion trends to consumers at competitive prices. This fast-fashion trend has added to environmental problems. The increasing use of polyester and other synthetic fibres in clothes requires ever larger volumes of petroleum and generates a range of polluting byproducts.

A throwaway lifestyle

The availability of cheap clothing in the latest fashions has led to a throwaway attitude to clothing, items that have gone out of fashion are discarded well before the end of their natural lifespan, so they end up as waste on landfill sites. Tackling this are their claims just 'greenwash'?

■ Do you believe that clothing retailers are really committed to sustainability or are their claims just 'greenwash'?

■ Try to trace the origins of an item of clothing. From the retailer through to supply chain. How far back can you get?

reuse or recycle such clothing do not exist here. Charity shops sell around 25% of recycled clothes, and some are exported to developing countries, but this can damage local production in these countries.

Conclusion

Growing public awareness of the social and environmental conditions under which clothes are produced has led the majority of the UK's leading clothes retailers to develop sustainability policies. But the clothing industry will only become more sustainable if consumers buy less clothing and wear their clothes for longer. At present the opposite is happening.

Points for further discussion

- Should changes in clothes purchasing behaviour be led by retailers or by consumers?
- What effects would a move to more sustainable clothing industry have in the UK? What effects would it have in the major centres of clothing production in the developed world?
- Do you believe that clothing retailers are really committed to sustainability or are their claims just 'greenwash'?
- Try to trace the origins of an item of clothing. From the retailer through to supply chain. How far back can you get?

Key points

- The clothing industry is an important sector of the world economy with an annual value of US\$ 1,000 billion.
- The industry is linked into a cycle of unsustainability and faces a number of major environmental and social issues.
- The UK's major clothing retailers claim to be committed to sustainability but they need to balance such commitments against profitability.
- The clothing industry will only become more sustainable if consumers buy fewer clothes and wear them for longer.

Further reading

Forum for the Future (2007) 'Fashioning Sustainability'. www.forumforthefuture.org.uk/files/fashioning.html

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort work in the Business School at the University of Gloucestershire and David Hillier is an associate professor in the Centre for Justice Science at the University of Gloucestershire.

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