How to Make Material Change in Apparel’s Sustainability Era

By Arthur Friedman
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How to Create Material Change — Join us on Oct. 17 for the must-attend apparel supply chain conference.

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The sustainability movement has meant a sea change for raw materials sourcing in the apparel industry.

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When making decisions on which fabrics to use in their lines, brands now put the environmental origin and impact of the ingredients that comprise their clothes top of mind, experts speaking at the “How to Create Material Change” seminar at Texworld USA said.

Sustainability

Megan Meiklejohn, sustainable materials and transparency manager at Eileen Fisher, said,
“When you’re thinking about what goes into a garment, the first thing you need to focus on is what impact it will have and how we maximize the positive impact on the world.”

Meiklejohn said for her that begins with how the fiber is grown, harvested and extracted, as well as the textile processing and the end-use stage for that garment, and how the materials play into that. In addition, she is concerned about the end of the product’s life—“will it just go into a landfill, will it have the opportunity to be repurposed, renewed or can it be composted, which to me is the ultimate goal—having the material go from soil back to soil,” she said.

Meiklejohn said Eileen Fisher is always concerned about “making positive, beneficial change through fiber fulfillment.” A key, she said, is using natural fibers that support farmers, enable a more traceable supply chain and help create transparency.

Malvina Hoxha, business development manager for innerwear and knits for Lenzing Fibers, noted that the company’s production of wood-based fibers in a circular manufacturing model has given it a strong foundation to build on in striving for a greater sustainable profile.

“For us, it’s also about collaborating with the right partners in the supply chain so that our fibers stay in a sustainable environment,” Hoxha said.

Hanna Denes, senior standards manager at Textile Exchange, said the organization stresses the importance of maintaining sustainability throughout the lifecycle of a product by cooperation throughout the supply chain. This can also be achieved by following Textile Exchange’s standards and guidelines.

“It’s always nice to tell a sustainability story, but the aesthetic of the product is really important, as well,” Denes said, because products should be created to be desirable and have a long life. The same is true with building functionality and durability in products by making the correct material choices, she noted.

Denes said the overall sustainability of an apparel product “seems like it’s gaining a lot of traction” based on the number of inquiries from the industry at Textile Exchange for information and guidance on the best materials to use to achieve a desired result.

Hoxha said it’s important to note that within Lenzing and the industry, aspects such as price and delivery are still the first question even when a customer wants to have a strong sustainability factor in their line.

“We work with almost every brand or retailer out there, and while we’ve used responsibly sourced wood and produced our fiber in a closed loop manufacturing system for years, more and more people are asking us the question of how our product is sustainable,” she
said, adding that companies want to know exactly what the product is, how is it made and 
“how it is different from other products in the same space from a sustainability angle.”

Transparency

Eileen Fisher’s approach is built around its Vision 2020 initiative created about five years 
ago, Meiklejohn explained, in which the company examined the material; the social well-
being of employees and workers in its supply chain; transparency; circularity; and 
chemistry.

The company established goals that included 100 percent eco-preferred materials by 2020, 
only organic cotton and linen, all responsible wool and only synthetics derived from 
recycled materials.

“We've made some really good progress,” she said. “We’re at 99 percent organic cotton and 
almost 99 percent organic linen. But it's not really good enough because you can’t assess 
the impacts of those fiber traces...So the assessment of sustainability is really key and I 
think the industry as a whole is looking for an easy answer and unfortunately, it's not easy. 
It’s something we think about all the time.”

Now the company is focused on transparency more so than achieving certain goals because 
it takes into account the entire supply chain and the broader impact that material choice 
and other factors like manufacturing methods have, Meiklejohn said.

Recycled materials and beyond

Discussing the advent of recycled and upcycled materials and their environmental impact, 
Hoxha noted Lenzing’s Tencel with Refibra technology line introduced a couple of years ago 
—which uses cotton scraps blended with Tencel lyocell to create regenerated fiber 
produced in a close loop process—has been adopted by about a dozen brands and 
retailers, including Eileen Fisher. The fiber comes at a higher cost, Hoxha added.

“Circularity is something we think about a lot,” Meiklejohn said. “We have our own takeback 
program where we take back any garment in any condition that's Eileen Fisher. The 
customer gets $5 to spend in the store, but the garment goes to one of two processing 
centers,” and those either get resold at its Renew second-hand stores or repurposed as 
materials for various uses.

Looking ahead, Meiklejohn said, “I think there's going to be a focus on ecosystem restoration 
through regenerative fibers, as well as through circularity.”

Hoxha said, “I think we have to start thinking seriously about cutting out waste” and doing 
something about changing that lifestyle, while Denes added, “We're going to see an increase 
in circularity, with so much innovation going on to facilitate things like textile recycling and a
huge interest in use of animal fibers.”