



More than a buzz word

Updated: 2014-12-05 By Wang Chao(China Daily Europe)

In the garment industry, respecting the environment is now being seen as critical to profits

Starting about 10 years ago, the word sustainability began to be bandied about as a feel-good buzzword. These days the word is used earnestly in management circles in the same breath as the word profit.

In conventional terms, sustainability refers to visible efforts such as processing polluted water, recycling waste and cutting energy use. However, the term now has taken on many more meanings.

At the Milan international fabric exhibition in April, the organizers defined sustainability as "using materials, chemicals and technologies that to the most extent protect the environment, and offering healthy production conditions for workers, respecting the community environment while meeting customers' requirements on the looks of products".

Today whether a textile company is environmentally friendly is no longer determined by a narrow set of traditional figures, but include its carbon emissions as a whole, experts say.

Sustainability, previously carried out by corporate social responsibility departments in Chinese companies, is now seriously affecting companies' margins.

Aaron Lee, chief operating officer of Brands & Distribution, Esquel Group, with headquarters are in Hong Kong, cites the example of saving energy in the process of making garments. The company says it starts by picking the right cotton, which is whiter than the normal product.

"So it allows us to use less bleach, which saves water, energy and chemicals."

By incorporating the sustainability philosophy, companies can greatly cut costs, experts say.

The China National Textile and Apparel Council says Chinese textile companies cut CO2 emissions by 25 percent in 2012 compared with 2010, and water consumption fell 28 percent, while the amount of water recycled rose 10 percent.

Last year, 6 million tons of fiber was recycled and reprocessed, 50 percent more than in 2010, the council says.

In a big garment-making company there can be thousands of offcuts and old samples. Tian Ye, managing director of specialty spinning, Esquel Group, says every year Esquel has more than 44,000 tons of these pieces.

"We separate them by color, extract the fibers and then categorize these fibers by the fiber length," Tian says.

"Longer fibers can be used to create various effects on clothes, but fibers shorter than 13 millimeters can only be turned into cotton swabs or wipes," Tian says.

The company has recycled uniforms for Cathay Pacific and rewoven them into blankets for the airline. It also adds organic and recycled fibers to some garments that international brands order, according to customer requirements.

Recently the company received an order for recycled materials for T-shirts from Apple stores. The first order was for 100 tons of fiber.

Nevertheless, of 44,000 tons of waste a year, only 2,000 tons is reprocessed.

"If we wanted to process more, we would have to open another production line," Tian says.

The international environmental protection organization Greenpeace says the textile industry accounts for 7 percent of total exports worldwide a year, and consumers spend \$1 trillion on textile products a year. The industry is responsible for 24 percent of the pesticides used worldwide, it says, and every year 1 million tons of textiles are thrown into landfills.

Last year, Swedish garment brand H&M initiated a movement to recycle people's old clothes: People can bring clothes they no longer wear to its shops and exchange them for a 20 percent discount voucher for new clothes.

That program has won plaudits in the clothing industry, but a less kind view is that H&M is simply encouraging people to buy more clothes.

Most waste in the textiles industry is the result of improper standards, experts say.

"For instance, our client Nike requires the colors of collars and the body of clothes to look exactly the same," Tian says.

"This sounds reasonable, but it is extremely hard to achieve because the body part is plain weave, while the collar is woven, and they reflect light differently, so even if the colors are identical they can look different.

"So we are forced to go through a huge amount of trial and error to decide on a right color, and that generates a lot of waste."

In an effort to reduce unnecessary waste, downstream customers need to be much more tolerant, he says.

A lot of waste also occurs in producing samples, Tian says. Every February and March before sales meetings with customers, garment-makers expend a lot of time, effort and fabric in making sample garments for the customers. These samples are sent back and forth between the two parties, and that costs a lot of time and money.

Doug Freeman, chief operating officer of premium outdoor brand Patagonia, suggests companies use electronic samples instead of tangible ones to reduce the cost and the carbon emissions during transport.

"This also requires that we trust each other more along the industry chain so we can work more efficiently and in a more environmentally friendly way."

wangchao@chinadaily.com.cn



**Picking the right
cotton allows us
to use less bleach,
which saves water,
energy and chemi-
cals.**

AARON LEE



(China Daily European Weekly 12/05/2014 page15)

http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-12/05/content_19030801.htm