

# TRADE TALKS



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## ‘RETAIL MARKETING IN THE POST-CONSUMER ERA’

Sustainability in the apparel industry has gone, within a relatively short period, from an outlying, elective concept to a mainstream (although still electoral) operational and marketing tool. American economist Friedman stated back in 1970 that the single social responsibility of business is to increase its profits, but today that is no longer sufficient for the public, with brands that embed social and environmental responsibility into their operations gaining reputational kudos and loyal followings from customers.

Tools like Tearfund’s Ethical Fashion Guide provide consumers with insight into brands operations and rate companies on the ethical performance. Originally socially focused, this year Tearfund is broadening their reporting to include environmental questions. Their reasoning is pollution impacts on society, and ethicality and sustainability are deeply intertwined.

Evidence of the mainstreaming of sustainability in the fashion industry can be found through changes like Vogue Australia creating a Sustainability Editor role. Clare Press has been appointed the new position, a fashion journalist, Clare is also the author of *Wardrobe Crisis: How We Went from Sunday Best to Fast Fashion* and hosts a podcast of the same name. This shift from sustainability as an occasional magazine topic, to an ongoing publication theme with its own editor, is reflective of the shift within the market and the mainstreaming of responsible fashion brands.

High-end sustainable fashion brand Stella McCartney has been working closely with the Ellen Mac Arthur Foundation ([www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org](http://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org)) a British charity and research organisation set up to assist and accelerate the transition to a circular economy. The foundation has given particular focus to the clothing industry due to its environmental and human impacts, issuing a number of white papers on the industry which has driven global behaviour change and understanding of

the effects of the current model. Their latest report on the fashion industry is available free of charge online.

The Foundation’s CEO Andrew Morlet was in New Zealand in March, and I was fortunate enough to have dinner with him. The strong message he delivered is that our current economic model is untenable, we urgently need to move to a system where we can unmake everything we make, so resources become available for reuse rather than lost (mainly to landfill). In doing so, we can significantly reduce the inputs we consume and reduce the pollution created. But we are starting at ground level, investment and collaboration are needed by business to build the systems that will enable more circularity of products and resources. Clothing brands H&M and Nike (along with other multinational corporations) are signed up as global partners of the Foundation contributing £1 million each per year to enable the Foundation’s work.

Their research has found that since 2000 the world’s garment production has doubled and is now sitting at 100 billion garments per year, compounded by a 20 percent reduction in how much clothing is worn. Such information has sparked a movement to slow consumerism, with social media influencers like Olivia Firth (Colin Firth’s wife and founder sustainability consulting company Eco Age) whose hashtag #30wears encourages people to wear their clothes more before considering buying new garments. And Patrick Duffy whose Global Fashion Exchange is a giant clothing swap that travels around the world from city to city, with participants swapping clothes rather than purchasing new ones. Reflective of this some economists are concluding the world is transitioning from a hyper-consumption economic model to a post-consumerism era that is beginning to take into consideration the ecological boundaries of this planet.

Given the transition we are facing, how we communicate to customers also needs to evolve. Marketing doctrine was formed in the optimistic post-war era of the 1950’s when the theory emerged that humankind was not limited to purchasing just for utilitarian, practical and functional reasons, but also purchased products for pleasure and the symbolic meaning of goods. This concept has been the foundation of consumer behaviour theory for near on sixty years. However, the optimistic post-war environment is significantly different to today’s market environment. Global warming and environmental issues were unheard of, there were no corporate sustainability strategies, there was no triple bottom line reporting and certainly, no circular economy thinking.


Growing sales of products with more altruistic properties suggest consumers buy with an awareness

of the world they live in; they buy with aspirations of a kinder place, where global warming and ecological disaster can be averted. This altruistic approach is based on Principlism, initially defined by the bio-ethics field and comprised of four shared moral principles:

1. Autonomy – respect for persons
2. Beneficence – do good
3. Nonmaleficence – do no harm
4. Justice – social distribution of benefits and burden (fairness)

These shared moral principles can equally be applied to customer expectations of the products they purchase, with today’s consumers expressing their support or rejection of a company’s behaviour or ideology by how they spend their money. Brands that align well not only with a consumer’s identity but also with their philosophy and principles are supported. But there is a known disconnect between intention and action within the genre of ethical/principled products.

In attempting to tailor products and marketing ever more closely to consumer tastes to achieve closer consumer brand identity alignment, marketers have inadvertently overlooked or undervalued the importance of people’s connection to their communities and societies they inhabit. The flourishing and success of social enterprises are a case in point, their proliferation across the globe attest to the importance of connectedness and communities. These entities not only address grassroots community needs but in doing so have become serious contributors to economies as they redefine the model for business. Applied moral principles appear in government procurement guidelines with the inclusion of sustainable and ethical considerations in purchasing. They also appear in corporate purchasing as an instrument for brand and reputation management. Just as government and business procurement include moral considerations when purchasing, so too do individuals.

Altruistic product offerings may adhere to the shared moral principles of Principlism, and often the marketing stories tell of benefits to remote communities (e.g. Fair Trade). By considering consumers need for direct connection, to their families and friends, to their own communities and societies, we could narrow the gap between intention and action. Acknowledging our connectedness to our immediate society and its moral code would reflect more closely the complex nature of consumer behaviour and the motivators that influence it. 



Bernadette Casey, Peter Thompson (The Formary CEO), and Andrew Morlet.