

LOW CARBON IS TRENDING - ARE YOU READY?

Written by Brian Johnston | 10 October 2019

You would have to be hiding under a rock these days to not have noticed the massive increase in public, media, business and governmental attention on climate change. There is a real groundswell of support for action. We increasingly feel anxious about the effect that our modern lifestyle is having on the planet, and consumers want to take personal action.

We are part of a global and growing industry, with huge movements of materials and finished product crisscrossing the world. Climate change, and carbon emissions are a global challenge, and we are a global industry. So what does this mean for businesses in/or interacting with the textile industry?



Extinction Rebellion Protest @ London Fashion Week 2019
Ref: Sara Cresswell.

Let's first take a look at the current estimated impact of the industry, focusing on apparel and footwear as that has the best data currently. The industry currently produces 20 pieces of clothing per person per year(!), with a carbon footprint estimated at 440kg CO2 per person (equivalent to driving 2400km in a car).

Environmental impacts like water use, carbon emissions, and other types of pollution are set to triple by 2050 at current industry growth rates. Those are some pretty eye-popping numbers, and most of the emissions occur outside the operations of the businesses bringing products to market.

Consumers are increasingly aware of the consequences of their fashion habits, and some are starting to opt-out by committing to stop buying garments altogether. That is exactly what happened during recent Extinction Rebellion activity linked to London Fashion Week, and we have heard similar anecdotal evidence locally too. This is a threat to the whole industry, and businesses increasingly need to show their customers that they are taking credible action to address climate change.

The good news is that the textile industry is relatively well placed to address these concerns, in comparison to other industries. I was recently asked to present to a group of NZ businesses who have committed to the 'Climate Leaders Coalition' and are on the path to reducing their carbon emissions. My key message there was that what goes on in the value chain matters i.e. up and downstream of your business - it is on average around 80% of CO2 emissions for a business, and in the apparel and footwear industry it is more like 95%.

In this context, efforts to reduce your business' direct emissions are still worthy, but pale in comparison to the potential positive impact you can achieve in the value chain. Collaboration with suppliers and customers is the name of the game, to drive the impact that is needed.

IMPACT = LEARN + ENGAGE TO REDUCE

Carbon emissions are occurring in your value chain from raw materials extraction and finished product manufacture, through to consumer use and product end of life

Learning where the emissions hotspots are is key to being able to focus your efforts - as engagement in this space is more challenging than changing things in your direct operations. A common starting place is to map out your value chain and have a go at estimating emissions at each step of the chain.

The second important element is to plan how to engage with your value chain partners i.e. suppliers, customers, to build their knowledge and ownership of efforts. A best-practice approach includes three elements that help to build real engagement:

- Compliance e.g. supplier code of conduct
- Support e.g. training, supplier/product development guidelines
- Incentives e.g. integrated procurement scoring, awards

There are a number of useful resources if you are interested in getting started on your climate strategy, or want to take the next step. The apparel and footwear industry, with the support of the World Resources Institute, has released a sector guide for setting targets for your direct and indirect i.e. value chain emissions in line with science, and the 'Climate Leaders Coalition' site contains case studies from various industries. And if you are looking for some support on your journey to a low carbon future, get in touch - we'd love to help.

A representative depiction of the Apparel and Footwear Value Chain



Resources:

- [Climate Leaders Coalition](#)
- [World Resources Institute sector guide](#)

Sustainability Consultant for The Formary, Brian is a business sustainability specialist with extensive textile industry experience working within global brands to integrate sustainability into business strategy.



Brian is familiar with all major sustainability topics in the textile and fashion industry, including carbon emissions, supply chain traceability, hazardous chemical risks, circular product design, water risk, and modern slavery. He has worked closely with global industry groups including the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (brand, product and supplier sustainability assessment), AFIRM Group (restricted substances management), and Science Based Targets (Apparel Sector Guidance) to develop tools that help the industry to adopt a more sustainable approach.

Time spent working inside businesses means that Brian understands the practicalities and complexities of implementing sustainability strategies that satisfy the expectations of Brands' wide range of stakeholders, from suppliers to staff to customers. Brian believes that local fashion and textile businesses have a critical role to play in helping society to address its sustainability challenges, and exceeding customer expectations is key. NZ brands are best served by building up a credible approach to sustainability which delivers on positive impact, and ties in with customers' broader expectations of a quality product

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