



Delivering

Details matter. A brand can have the most sustainably-produced product on the planet, but if it's packaged in miles of plastic and layers of foam, the consumer's first impression will not be a good one. In today's race for sustainability, consumers want to know that the brand's eco-awareness didn't end at the factory floor. Consumers want to see a product that's sustainable all the way to their door.

Those final details of packaging and delivery can go a long way toward upholding a brand's sustainability credibility and can save money in the long run as well. And brands and manufacturers don't have to tie themselves in knots to improve their processes. It can be as easy as the old mantra of: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

Packaging

Starting with packaging is a good first step. Owen Hammond, director of operations and sustainability for Teko Socks, says that the first thing to do is "use less stuff." Hammond says, "When you look at your packaging, you'll find that there's some you can easily eliminate." He also recommends using recycled or recyclable materials whenever possible, as well as reusable packaging.



Sustainability

By Maria C. Thiry

“Packaging isn’t just the material that faces the consumer,” notes Hammond. There are two types of packaging: consumer-facing, or “front-end,” and transportation, or “back-end” packaging. Front-end packaging has a marketing component, but the packaging that gets the textile product from the factory to the distribution center and retailer is just as important. Back-end packaging “keeps the product protected, clean, and undamaged,” says Elissa Loughman, environmental analyst for retail brand Patagonia.

She says it’s important to reduce the amount of packaging that’s used. “It’s a continual challenge to reduce packaging while still protecting the product,” says Loughman. But wasting packaging and transportation on shipping empty *air* is a no-brainer. “Put as much product as possible in one box and use as small a box as possible to move as much product as possible,” says Loughman. “It’s better to ship larger quantities or more efficient package sizes,” says Russell McCann, president of supply chain material tracking software firm Actio Corp.

On the other hand, most textile products come wrapped in plastic bags, and while it might appear wasteful, the bags do a good job of protecting the product at a low weight and bulk. Unprotected textiles can fall prey to all kinds of dirt, contami-

nants, stains, and other insults that can ruin the fabric—making the product unsalable, and thus, unsustainable. “We haven’t found a way to eliminate plastic bags,” says Loughman. “We like the idea of creating reusable plastic bags, but making that workable would need an extensive infrastructure in place.”

Marketing

While there are numerous ways to make back-end packaging more sustainable, there are more constraints on front-end packaging. Besides the job of protecting the textile product, front-end packaging has an additional task of marketing the product and making it stand out on the sales floor. As Hammond says, “The product has to *pop*.”

“People want to have more sales. How do we design in an environmentally correct way and catch the consumer’s eye while still achieving environmental goals?” asks McCann. Finding the happy medium between minimal packaging and marketing clout is a serious concern, says Rob Nathan, product director at footwear brand SOLE and member of the Outdoor Industry Association’s (OIA) Eco-working Group in charge of packaging. Loughman says that Patagonia’s solution is to use an FSC-certified, recycled paper hangtag to convey all the necessary



Production

“Back-end” packaging protects textile products at all stages of production until it reaches the retailer or final customer. Alan Stark of fabric and apparel manufacturer Carmel Textiles Inc. says that his company uses sustainable packaging and shipping practices at each stage of production. “Yarns are shipped on continuously recycled plastic pallets,” he notes. He says the pallets are designed for long term use and fully recyclable at the end of their useable product

life. Rolls of knitted greige goods (undyed fabric) are “identified by marking on the rolls themselves with markers—no paper tags, inks, or trash,” says Stark. “All rolls are self-enveloped to protect and package the rolls for shipping—no plastic bags, ties, or trash there either.” Stark says Carmel uses electronic data transfer for shipping documents and packing details to reduce the use of paper and ink, and the amount of trash produced as well as the energy necessary to transport all that paper.



information to the consumer and eliminate all other packaging designed for marketing. Patagonia has also shifted much of its marketing material onto its website, where information is more centrally located and available to consumers.

But Hammond says that there’s “no silver bullet” in terms of packaging meant as marketing. “It takes creativity,” he says. “There’s a fine balancing act to achieve both good sustainability goals and useful marketing goals.” Brands should try to be as sustainable as possible and use eco-friendly materials, but ultimately, says Hammond, “If you can’t sell a product, it’s not sustainable.”

Shipping & Logistics

Delivering textile products sustainably doesn’t just mean packing them efficiently, it means shipping them in the most eco-friendly manner as well. Lifecycle analyses have revealed that shipping makes up a relatively small part of the overall footprint of a textile product, says Loughman. However, it’s always a good idea to keep that footprint small by using efficient transportation.

“Shipping by boat is most efficient,” says Loughman. “To improve efficiency, it’s a good idea to ship to the port closest to your distribution center. Ship-

ping by air is the least efficient and least environmentally friendly method. But it can happen sometimes if there is a rush." Whatever the shipping method, "planning ahead of time is necessary to take advantage of more environmentally efficient shipping by sea, train, and truck," says Hammond. He adds that distributed manufacturing (a merging of manufacturing with distribution center) can cut down on intermediate transportation as well.

Consumers & Industry

In the end, the measures that brands take with regards to improving the sustainability of their packaging and shipping options are heavily influenced by the consumer, especially regarding front-end packaging. Consumers' sense of what is "appropriate" often affects packaging decisions. "For example, underwear and baselayer products (long underwear) are often packaged in protective boxes or bags for display in retail stores. Does underwear have to come in a box? Customers can have a voice in packaging as well. Their purchasing preferences can influence how a brand decides to package and display their products," says Loughman.

More sustainable packaging and shipping is an industry-wide issue, which may require industry-wide cooperation to improve. McCann says that some kind of "universal scorecard" for packaging materials would be helpful. Nathan says that the OIA eco-working group is coming up with metrics for packaging materials, including a restricted substance list. Working together for this common goal makes sense, says Loughman, "We love to hear what other people are doing. We want to collaborate on the solutions that make sense for everyone." 

Efficiency = Profitability

Packaging efficiency also translates into shipping efficiency. "If you can fit more things in one truckload, you can save transportation costs," notes Rob Nathan, product director at footwear brand SOLE and member of the Outdoor Industry Association's Eco-working Group in charge of packaging. "For example, if we can fit 30 pairs of socks in a shipping carton instead of 25, that's what we'll do. Complex construction, multiple materials, and extra space in the packaging are the enemies of shipping and packaging products sustainably."

Alan Stark, president of fabric and apparel manufacturer Carmel Textiles Inc., says that efficiency is a key idea in packaging and shipping textiles sustainably. "When you do a lot of little things they add up to a lot of benefits," he says. "A slightly thinner cardboard can have a big impact when you're talking a million boxes," Nathan agrees.

Nathan says that when a company makes packaging materials and shipping procedures more efficient, it ends up using fewer non-renewable resources. "Instead of using new boxes, reuse the same boxes instead," he says. "It takes some planning, but these changes will often save companies money as well as making them more sustainable." Owen Hammond, director of operations and sustainability for Teko Socks, concurs that greater efficiency often translates into lower costs. "The great thing about most sustainable directives is that you save money," he says.



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