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Insight into Emerging Opportunities for Sustainable-Led Strategies in Textiles

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Received Date: September 24, 2019

Published Date: October 03, 2019

Abstract

Sustainability is an important, but ever-changing area of development. The potential benefits to society and the planet are limitless. However, many profit seeking companies struggle with sustainability and how to incorporate sustainable-led strategies without compromising the bottom-line. It is particularly true in textiles, where it can be a significant challenge to deliver impactful products, while utilizing sustainable-led strategies. This paper provides insight into the opportunities for sustainable-led strategies in textiles. After a brief review of sustainable-led strategies, the paper explores the impact of technology on sustainability and how this interaction has led to market opportunities in a variety of industries, including textiles. The discussion indicates that sustainable-led strategies can be an effective approach in textiles. As sustainability becomes more important to the planet and consumer demand for sustainable products grow, companies in textiles can utilize technology to implement effective sustainable-led strategies to maximize the growing demand for sustainable products and drive the bottom-line.

Keywords: Sustainable-led strategies; Sustainable textiles; Sustainability

Introduction

The impact of sustainability and the potential benefits to our society are growing in importance every day. Much of the research has been focused on opportunities to reduce carbon foot printing and increase the environmental benefits to mankind. This benefit has little to no value for many profit seeking companies. However, due to many technological advances and innovation, the area of sustainability has grown in its importance and potential impact for profit seeking companies. With recent technological advances and innovation, companies have begun to successfully use sustainable-led strategies to not only reduce carbon foot printing, but also attract new customers, increase demand, and improve the bottom-line. Utilizing sustainable-led strategies has already benefited other industries, like banking where there has been a significant increase in technology and reduction of paper over the last 10 years. This has led to a reduction in carbon foot printing and billions of dollars in savings. These changes also benefited consumers by providing them easier access to their personal banking information and making it easier to process transactions on multiple platforms. Research conducted in 2015 indicated that sustainable banks are characterized by superior performance, more prudent behavior,

and a business model oriented towards consumers in the financing industry [1]. For many banks, sustainable-led strategies have led to break-through efficiencies and improved customer satisfaction. But, what about textiles? Is there an emerging opportunity to utilize sustainable-led strategies in textiles? This dialogue will provide insight into these opportunities. Specifically, this discussion will focus on providing further insight into successful sustainable-led strategies, the impact of technology on sustainable-led strategies, and emerging opportunities for textiles to utilize sustainable-led strategies.

Successful Sustainable-Led Strategies

Sustainability is not a new concept. However, with global warming and greater awareness of mankind's impact on the earth, its importance has been steadily growing. That being said, one of the main reasons that more profit seeking companies do not embrace sustainability is the belief that these efforts will drain organizational resources without benefiting the bottom-line. While sustainable efforts might be good for the planet, it typically costs a company significant resources and funding to implement these strategies. Furthermore, many of these strategies are seen as

“feel good” and not as an opportunity to drive consumer demand. Fortunately, there are companies that have successfully broken through these barriers and developed sustainable-led strategies that have helped to drive business results. One such example is Airbnb. When entering the market for temporary housing, Airbnb did not build new hotels, instead it developed a sustainable-led strategy that used technology to connect people who needed a place to stay with people who had room in their homes. Not only was this a very efficient business model, but it was also a sustainable-led model that reused existing resources [2]. This new business model was sustainable and also provided value to its customers. A study conducted by the Cleantech Group in 2017 found that Airbnb promotes a more efficient use of existing resources and categorized them as an environmentally sustainable way to travel [3]. HP is another example of a company that is maximizing sustainable-led strategies to drive business results. In 2017, HP calculated that at least \$700 million in new revenue was related to contracts or sales in which sustainability factors were a known consideration [4]. These results were driven by HP’s efforts to collect old components and reuse them in manufacturing new printers, ink cartridges and personal computers [4]. These companies are good examples of how profit seeking companies can utilize sustainable-led strategies to drive consumer demand and improve the bottom-line.

Impact of Technology on Sustainable-Led Strategies

Successful sustainable-led strategies are now more effective than ever. This is partly due to increased investments in corporate sustainability. “Corporate sustainability has gained a lot of attention in recent years, as companies, investors, and consumers alike are turning their attention towards increasingly critical corporate sustainability” [5]. But there are other factors that have played a role in companies being able to create and implement effective and impactful sustainable-led strategies. One of these critical factors is the growing impact of technology. Information and communication technology implementations are seen as critical elements to achieve sustainable business development [6]. Technological advances have provided a variety of ways for companies, large and small, to innovate. Products are lighter, stronger, and more personalized to consumer’s needs and desires. This impact cannot be understated. Some of these technological advances have helped to even the playing field for smaller and more agile companies that have been able to utilize sustainable-led strategies to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. For example, Uber successfully developed and implemented a sustainable-led strategy that was anchored in technology to help change the way US consumers are transported. This strategy changed personal and public transportation by matching car owners with spare capacities to riders who needed a ride [7]. By incorporating technology, Uber turned two forms of underutilized assets into productive capital, the unused personal car and leisure time, which resulted in a successful sustainable business model [7]. The model incorporated the use of an app to connect almost anyone with a personal car to people who need a ride. This was a breakthrough sustainable-led strategy that used technology to efficiently connect unused existing resources,

like people and cars, to deliver a service to fulfill customer’s needs. These efforts also helped Uber to have a desirable carbon footprint because there is no paper involved in these transactions. It is all done via an app, which is very efficient and does not harm the environment. Prior to Uber, many consumers were limited on how they acquired transportation and where they could go. After Uber, the sharing economy was in full force. Now, there are numerous companies that offer similar transportation options that are just as effective and sustainable. In today’s marketplace, almost anyone with a phone can get reliable transportation, food, or other services efficiently at an affordable price.

Sustainable-Led Strategies in Textiles

Historically, the apparel industry has been one of the worst environmental offenders, as one cotton t-shirt can use hundreds of gallons of water to make [8]. However, that does not mean that sustainable-led strategies will fail in textiles. There are ways to reduce the carbon footprint throughout the entire life cycle of textile products, which can include incorporating a recycling process for the waste instead of disposing it into a landfill or including an end-of-life recycling process for textiles [9]. These suggestions and other effective sustainable-led strategies can provide opportunities for textile companies to become more sustainable. But there are some emerging companies that have gone beyond the basic goal of carbon footprinting reduction. These emerging companies are using sustainable-led strategies as a foundation to satisfy consumer demands. One of these emerging sustainable-led companies is Rothy’s, which makes stylish women’s shoes from recycled bottles. The shoes are excellent quality and washable. Rothy’s is expected to generate \$140 million in revenues in 2019 and Goldman Sachs just invested \$35 million in the business [10]. Another emerging clothing company that is maximizing a sustainable-led strategy is Fair Harbor, which makes sustainable men’s swimwear with recycled plastic bottles that are sourced from mass recycling facilities around the world [11]. In addition to these companies, the chart below provides several other emerging textile companies that are not only using sustainable-led strategies, but also optimizing the opportunities in this burgeoning market [11] (Table 1).

Table 1: Emerging textiles companies with sustainable-led strategies.

| Company | Products | Sustainable-led Strategy |
|-----------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Faherty | Bathing Suits | Primarily Sourced from Recycled Plastic Bottles |
| Mara Hoffman | Women’s Fashion | Multiple Sustainable-Led Strategies |
| Nomadix | Beach Towels | Sourced from Certified Recycled Material |
| Rainbow Sandals | Shoes | Recycled Materials and Some Shoes Made from Hemp |
| Rareform | Bags | Sourced from Repurposed Vinyl Billboards |
| Rawganique | Children’s Shoes | Sourced from 100% Organically Grown Hemp |

Consumers are beginning to demand more from the products they purchase. These emerging textile companies are examples of companies that are finding success because they are filling this

demand by offering products that go beyond benefits, like style. Many of these companies are using sustainable-led strategies to incorporate sustainable raw materials into the product, which helps to create stylish and sustainable products. Yes, sustainable-led strategies can be successful in textiles. It is important to remember that consumers are savvy and are typically less responsive to surface efforts that do not meet common standards or create confusion. To effectively implement a sustainable-led strategy, companies need to fully embrace this direction in order to ensure these efforts are truly sustainable. For textiles, sustainable-led strategies can include changes like, sourcing raw materials from some type of recycled material, enhancing the production process to reduce the use of energy, or reducing the use of water. One of the most important things to note, however, is that successful sustainable-led strategies require a commitment from executive management. This is important because resources need to be shifted to support sustainability, which may require changing policies and procedures, updating the supply chain, or incorporating new resources, like employees and suppliers. This may appear to be straight-forward, but it typically requires a shift away from the previous way of doing business and moving towards sustainability initiatives that support this strategy.

Conclusion

The future for sustainable-led strategies in textiles is promising, as there are already some small emerging companies in textiles that are finding success. The impact of sustainability and the potential benefits to our society are growing in importance every day. Previously, the potential benefits to sustainability seemed to be limited to benefits to society and mankind. However, due to improving technologies and recent innovations, there is an emerging segment in textiles that is incorporating sustainable-led strategies with great success. No longer are sustainable benefits limited to society. With an effective sustainable-led strategy and an

executive management that is willing to commit to sustainability, it is possible to not only improve carbon foot printing, but also attract new customers, increase demand, and improve the bottom-line.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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