

The Closed Loop of The New Denim Project

Study Case
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March 2nd, 2020

Introduction

The New Denim Project is part of Iris Textiles, a textile company that is running since 1956 in Guatemala. They obtain denim scraps from different local jeans' manufacturers and turn them into new yarns and fabrics to produce high quality products. They have a zero waste philosophy that is chemical and dye free, plus, they reduce the amount of energy and water they use in the process to the minimum. They clearly have a sustainable philosophy, which is even included in their name: "New" stands for how another approach other than the past's one is being considered and put into action.

At the beginning, Iris was running on a linear model, based on creating new products out of raw and virgin materials. Never producing massively, they had a labor policy that respected their workers. With a partially responsible structure, the path to sustainability wasn't as difficult as it could be for larger brands that rely mainly on third parties to finish their products.

Since the clothing market is changing towards sustainability, the company is economically competitive and attractive, working in collaboration with many international sustainable and visionary brands. This report will discuss the key ideas behind the sustainable fashion of The New Denim Project and will analyze how this company operates in accordance with those ideas.

I was able to collect different web articles, and also used videos and information obtained from the company's link (Press). I also visited the websites of the companies that work together with The New Denim Project to check their profiles and stories behind their brands.

Closed-Loop Economy

Iris Textiles was taken to a sustainable and innovative level by Arianne Engelberg (grand-daughter of the founder), who was bringing fresh ideas to the family owned company. The idea behind the project is simple: Mock nature as much as possible (Nature recycles and creates new things from reused matter). Bring waste into their industrial process, use water and energy in effective ways, and go without harmful chemicals. The final product is a high quality upcycled fabric and yarn that can be used to manufacture durable articles.

The company's claims to have a closed loop that includes the following steps in their manufacturing cycle:

- 1- Waste from denim mills or sweatshops**
- 2- Denim scraps are broken down into fibers**
- 3- Fibers are spun into yarn, thread, and fabric**
- 4- Yarn that isn't good to be spun is donated to coffee farms to be composted**
- 5- The cycle begins again**

This illustrates how the company's manufacturing process is indeed circular, zero waste and efficient. The fact that they only work with cotton allows for their little waste to be recycled into nature (since cotton is a natural fiber, it is biodegradable under proper conditions) by means of agriculture. The latter is cotton fiber that can't be turned into yarn or fabric anymore because its quality is already too poor to go into the process anymore.

It wasn't possible to deepen into the agriculture process that uses the cotton as a natural fertilizer. Considering that the plantations that use them are high quality coffee farms, it would be expected that the leftovers of cotton that they accept from Iris would need to be free of any harmful substances. As mentioned above, they do not use dyes or other chemicals in any of their processes, but they would have to clean and remove dyes and other chemicals that would be present from the original denim manufactures. It is important to remember that the company's source of fabric comes from different denim mills and sweatshops that aren't necessarily sustainable. On this, additional research would be necessary.

Regarding their use of natural resources, some of the numbers that illustrate how the company is saving energy, and at the same time reducing their carbon footprint and water use, an excerpt from an article published in Intent states:

"In 2018 alone, we upcycled 834,474 pounds of discarded fibres and textiles. That equates to 7.57 billion litres of water having been

saved, along with 800,000 pounds of toxic chemicals and 7.57 million pounds of carbon dioxide that were prevented from entering the atmosphere.”

But for their process to be fully circular, it is also important for them to do something about their product's end life. They do not use new materials but recycle waste from other industries. However, they lose the bond with their goods after they are being sold. The fact that usually garments made from their fabrics are not part of the fast fashion industry (they are designed to be durable) would fill in this gap in the short run, avoiding to produce waste that would need to go to landfills at high rates. But on the long run, customers would still need to either recycle the fabric or compost it to complete the actual natural cycle.

To account for this, The New Denim project could incorporate a parallel program to recycle post consumer denim, and not just waste from jeans mills. This would increase their sustainability practices to a new level, one that would completely work just like nature itself.

Socially responsible company

Since their establishment, the company claims that they have complied with labor Guatemalan regulations, and they have provided good working conditions. They have zero tolerance to child labor, discrimination and other unethical practices. This is a task that is extremely difficult to accomplish within the fashion industry, when the designers are usually far away from the final product manufacture, usually done in developing countries where regulation simply does not happen.

Iris creates different articles for the local market, and they do not rely on third parties such as sweatshops that usually have a bad reputation for mistreating and underpaying their employees. With this, the company doesn't obtain additional monetary profit by obtaining better prices for their product production, but obtains a responsible company image. This increases the company's business opportunities in a new fashion industry that is becoming environmentally aware.

According to one of the sources (see references) some of their workers have been with the them for even decades, which might indicate the company probably has an attrition program. On their website as well as a website for a partner that sells their yarns, The Wool and The Gang, there are photos of employees with signs that say: *“we make your clothes”*. This confirms how they build a conscience in them as to how important their role is within the company, as well as the global economy, since without the workers there is no final product.

Collaboration with other companies

As part of the sustainability agenda, joining forces with other institutions is a vital part of the process. The company has worked for and collaborated with many brands, with different projects and designers around the world. Collaborators as well as Iris are benefited from this relationship, since the brand outreach can be increased with it, and at the same time, companies that use their fabrics can guarantee their materials come from sustainable and responsible sources.

The amount of companies they have worked with is really extensive, which shows how the collaboration can be made with not just a few fellow companies but with several ones. Some of them include: Mara Hoffman, The Wool and The Gang, Concalma, Algodones Mayas, Whole Foods, Takiho, Luna del Pinal, West Elm, Christy Turlington, among many others.

Conclusion

The New Denim Project is a sustainable company from within. Its sustainable practices run from a socially responsible manufacturer that respects their workers, to the very difficult zero waste philosophy that is really hard to achieve for a large scale production company. Even when sustainability encompasses so many different aspects, Iris has tried to follow the majority and most important of them.

The new front woman in charge of the company has been careful to understand every part of the production and supply chain process and adapt them or completely change them so that their practices are as sustainable as possible, with few opportunities left for improvement. This company is an example of how sustainability can be achieved, if not to a 100%, to a reasonable, ethical level.

References:

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