

Q&A: Madewell's push into sustainability

Article

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Insider Intelligence spoke with Liz Hershfield, senior vice president and head of sustainability at Madewell, about how Madewell has repositioned itself to adopt sustainability into the

brand's ethos and the steps other retail companies should take to encourage sustainable shopping behaviors.

Insider Intelligence: Why did Madewell rebrand to incorporate sustainability?

Liz Hershfield: It quietly started with our recycling program for denim, which has now evolved into our Madewell Forever resale. We were one of the first denim brands to adopt that thinking about circularity. It became clear that denim has a huge impact on the environment. Our customers are really passionate about sustainability, and they helped push us to do better every step of the way. We understood that we needed to find a way to replenish our resources and run our business without inflicting damage on the planet.

II: How did Madewell's business model implement sustainable practices?

LH: Fabric production is one of the biggest polluters in the fashion industry, so we set goals around having 100% of our key fibers be sustainably sourced by 2025. Then we looked at our operations and set a carbon neutrality goal.

Lastly, our sustainability goals are around people, as it's important to consider how the environment impacts people. There are so many people that don't work for us directly, but help bring our product to life, and we have a goal around having 90% of our denim be fair trade certified by 2025. We chose denim because it's our hero product, and the biggest piece of our business, and therefore the biggest impact for the workers. We will pay a premium directly to the workers for any product that they work on manufacturing for us, based on the cost of the products.

II: What are some changes you would like to see within ecommerce and retail?

LH: It's a customer-facing issue I would like to see change as the ecommerce market expands —expectations around shipping. Does everyone need everything yesterday? Air freighting products to consumers so they can get their products immediately has a big impact on the environment. I would love to see a movement where we encourage shoppers to send something by a truck shipment instead of air freight.

There are some interesting new startups that have popped up around consolidating shipments from one place, so customers can consolidate their shipments with other customers in the area. It's complicated, but the shipping piece of an expanding ecommerce market is a tough hurdle to tackle. Everyone wants everything now, but how do we do that in an environmentally friendly way?

II: How do you convince consumers to adopt more sustainable shopping habits?

LH: It's about letting the consumer know what their impact is. We've had conversations internally on how we can do this—whether to give customers incentives to ship things by truck, showing them their carbon footprint if they chose air freight, or a slew of other options. We have not yet rolled the option out for consumers to decide how to carbon offset their purchases, but we are discussing how we can educate them better. All companies, including us, have more work to do with educating the customer.

II: What needs to change with the retail customer?

LH: In the same vein of how everyone needs to get acquainted with slower shipping, customers need to understand their expectations around limitless selection. The ecommerce industry offers everything online, and it's important because you can't put all your products in the store.

This is where the option of resale comes in. We might still have the same amount of a product to offer, but maybe more of it is having a second or third life. This will allow the customer to choose something that's more sustainable.