

The Advantage of Starting Fresh

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In my previous job as product line director, I researched, designed and developed technical apparel for a long-time market leader in environmentally conscious practices: Patagonia. The Patagonia philosophy is to make the best possible product with the least harmful impact. Patagonia was one of the first large companies to eliminate PVCs and introduce organic cotton and recycled polyester. It also strove to do good in other ways, such as by giving money to environmental organizations.

Perhaps Patagonia's efforts are all the more impressive because the company was founded before most green technology and know-how was developed. As a result, the company has had to re-organize itself to meet its goals, and that process inevitably requires time, patience and compromise. It is difficult for an established company to make these types of radical

changes without threatening its legacy, its products and, by extension, customer loyalty.

During my eight-year tenure at Patagonia, I realized it was impossible to perfect the sustainability profile of every product we offered. The technology that would allow us to replace all of our "bad" materials with "good" ones simply didn't exist. A black-or-white attitude toward sustainability would have necessitated the withdrawal of some product lines, inevitably alienating customers. I certainly wouldn't advocate that a well-meaning company should be zealous to the point of undercutting itself. Yet I was irresistibly tempted by the possibility of starting fresh in a business that prioritized sustainability from its inception, and that could immediately take advantage of the latest technology to produce high-quality, low-impact products.

In 2005, Eric Reynolds, co-founder of the outdoor company Marmot, approached me with a plan for a new outdoor company that would try to do everything I'd dreamed. Eric had been in the outdoor industry for a long time and felt disenchanted. The consolidation of brands and retailers had a "Wal-Mart" effect, with a handful of buyers controlling what the consumer could purchase. Eric felt that it was time for a shakeup of both the product and distribution strategy. He wanted to try something completely new and was ambitious enough to get top-quality people working on it.

That concept is the framework of Nau today: an apparel company that meets the outdoor clothing needs of people who live in an urban environment (as most people do). The clothing combines the latest in high-performance apparel technology with classic, well-fitting style. Most importantly, it takes advantage of the most sustainable materials and processes.

Needless to say, Eric's pitch compelled me to leave Patagonia to work for Nau. There, I joined a team of like-minded designers and businesspeople from the outdoor and sportswear industries (Nike, Adidas and Patagonia, among others). All shared a deep interest in sustainability. As veterans of the outdoor industry, we were well acquainted with its standards in terms of performance (which is generally extremely high) and appreciation of nature (which tends to feature prominently in marketing material, at least). What we were generally missing, we felt, were style and a concrete, rigorous sustainability profile. Of the two, achieving sustainability proved the greater challenge.

We began by identifying desirable performance characteristics—durability, comfort, weatherproofing, etc. Finding materials was the most intensive part of the planning process, especially for me as product designer. Certainly, the company developed a Restricted Substance List to keep out such harmful chemicals as PVC, heavy metal dyes and many finishing chemicals. However, the list addresses only a fraction of the issues surrounding a sustainable apparel line. Setting guidelines beyond the level of

specific chemicals was a more complex and subtle process. We think that making sustainable decisions requires balancing many criteria, and frankly, we don't have a hard-and-fast rule for prioritizing our materials requirements.

That said, we avoid sourcing any non-renewable materials that are not made from recycled content, as well as materials that don't have a clear, responsible end-of-life strategy (recycling or composting). As a consequence of the latter principle, we do not blend fibers if blending prevents them from being composted or recycled—such as the case of organic cotton and recycled polyester.

For fibers from renewable resources, we consider cultivation or ranching issues. We use only organic cotton. For our corn-based fabrics, we have temporarily adopted an offset program to purchase non-genetically modified (GMO) corn while we move toward the eventual goal of using only certified organic feedstock. The program consists of calculating the weight of the corn needed for a season's-worth of fiber, and then purchasing that amount of non-GMO corn for the dextrose processing plant that supplies the dextrose for our Poly Lactic Acid (PLA), the biopolymer we use that is derived from corn. For wool, we are developing land use, animal treatment and processing criteria. Organic wool is not the single obvious choice for us because we feel that the organic standards only address a fraction of the issues, and there is also the problem of limited supply.

Our next step was to stick our heads out there and see what the market could offer. In certain cases, there is no sustainable option that meets outdoor performance criteria. Lycra, added for stretch, is one example. Many of the materials on the shelves of sustainable suppliers did not address our needs in terms of aesthetics or performance. To circumvent this problem, we worked with the R&D departments of the most innovative textile mills to develop entirely new fabrics, among them a corn-based PLA fiber, high-quality recycled polyester, and several fabrics that incorporated organic cotton. Out of about 28 fabrics, only two of them were bought off the shelf.

The mills were willing to go the extra mile for us in part because we had strong existing relationships with them. In addition, our agreement with the mills stipulated that the technology they developed with us could be transferred to any other company that wanted to use it. Nau is not trying to make proprietary claims, and our attitude contrasts sharply with typical business strategy. We believe that open-handedness is central to the idea of sustainability. I never understood the sense of trying to make the world a better place while at the same time preventing others from following your lead. The only type of information that we keep to ourselves might be a certain pattern or weave, so that our product retains its distinctive aesthetic look.

We feel satisfied with our textiles. Improving the sustainability of trimmings (zippers, snaps and buckles,

etc.) has been the most difficult. At this time, we use nickel-free metal and look for metals made with recycled content. At this stage, metal fastenings are simply much more durable than any of the available alternatives made from a renewable material. We feel it is important that our products last a long time.

For every product, we are developing a sustainable end strategy to keep them out of landfills. Our goal is that products will be either recycled or composted, and we are working on take-back programs. Teijin, our Japanese polyester supplier, offers Ecocycle™, the best chemical recycling program that we have found for apparel. Their process allows polyester garments to be recycled into a new PET polymer that is virtually undistinguishable from virgin PET. This method allows for the widest reuse. We also rely on more mechanical PET recycling services that create fibers for end uses which are usually further down the recycling ladder.

The design of the product itself also enhances sustainability. Our designs ensure that our products last 10 years. All of our products can be maintained using low-impact washing procedures, and nothing we make requires dry cleaning. Aesthetically, we ensure that the shape, color and fit of our products are not easily datable to a certain season. In the interest of increasing longevity and attracting customers, we have also decided not to put logos on our products. I think we've all experienced wanting to buy a particular piece of clothing but ultimately walking away from

it after noticing the huge logo blazoned on the front and back. The idea of sticking logos all over a person as though he or she was a NASCAR driver is old-fashioned, as is the idea that by wearing a certain brand the consumer becomes an authentic member of a particular crowd. We suspect that our customers are not so interested in becoming walking billboards. They want to personalize their garments as they see fit, and they will enjoy them all the more for their subtlety.

In addition to material and design, we are implementing enlightened business operations. We have hired a third-party auditor to examine the labor and environmental practices of the factories we contract. We restrict the difference between the highest and lowest salary paid to 12 times. We are anticipating that we will receive LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Silver certification for our Boulder store. Because there are many factors as yet unresolved regarding our retail stores (such as exact locations, signed leases, final design, cost projections, etc.), it is not yet entirely clear whether we will be in a position to achieve LEED certification for all of our stores. We're exploring every option to achieve this goal. We purchase renewable energy for all our stores and corporate offices, and offset carbon for all product shipping and corporate travel.

With up to a 20 percent price difference between identical sustainable and conventional items, our business model has to create a cost advantage. From the outset, Eric advocated adopting the direct-to-

consumer retail model. This benefits the environment by limiting the extraneous shipping that occurs with the traditional, brick-and-mortar store model. It also improves our margin enough to remain competitive. Hopefully, as supplies of sustainable materials increase, the costs will come down.

Since Nau's inception in 2005, we have already noticed an encouraging attitude shift toward sustainability issues from suppliers, customers and other companies. A lot of technological innovation is happening on the supply side, as manufacturers recognize the value of the eco-conscious market. On the retail end, recycled content fabric mills who previously accepted exclusive contracts with apparel companies are starting to open up. In the future, I look forward to meeting new designers who have been educated in sustainability. The sustainability movement feeds on its own momentum. The more customers that buy these products, the more retailers stock them, the more suppliers increase the supply and range of styles available, which in turn makes customers more likely to buy them.

