

Wearing your heart on your sleeve

By  Nicci Botha

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Whether shopping for something as simple as a pair of jeans or that must-have fashion item, the average consumer doesn't give much thought to where the garment came from...

But since the 1990s, several big apparel brands have been embarrassed by media exposure and subsequent growing public awareness that their merchandise was produced in sweat shops in poor countries.

Despite measures being put in place to verify the origin of products, the scourge of sweat shops was highlighted again as recently as 2012 when a fire in a Bangladeshi garment factory - believed to supply household names in the US - killed more than 100 people working in extremely hazardous conditions.



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Avedis Seferian, President and CEO: Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP) - an independent, non-profit organisation promoting safe, ethical manufacturing through education and certification - said the root of the problem is that mass demand means some brands have lost the ability to know what is going on in the supply chain.

In a business environment where producing affordable clothing relies on large-scale production to turn a profit, many big brands outsource their supply chain and sell a product from a process that is not owned or operated by themselves.

Therefore social compliance has become a cornerstone in choosing suppliers by major retailers, resulting in the development of a code of conduct.

"Originally, the code of conduct was based on a 'comply or die' concept. But it soon became obvious that this approach was not conducive to long-term sustainability. New models based on labour issues in line with the core International Labour Organisation conventions such as no forced or compulsory labour, no child labour, and acceptable work conditions have been developed."

"These codes of conduct are now expanding in scope to include environmental, trade and security issues," he said.

The bottom line is that buyers expect vendors to take responsibility for social, customs and environmental compliance.

Seferian explained that social compliance and ethical business practices have become even more pertinent with the advent of the internet and social media.

"Today everyone is a potential journalist, and therefore responsible sourcing is an imperative in a 24/7 media environment for risk management and business continuity," he said.

In terms of best practices, retailers adhering to social compliance expect good management systems, commitment from top management, continuous education of employees and, most importantly, supporting documentation that they are complying from their suppliers.

To comply, Seferian advised that local manufacturers looking to break into the US and other international markets undergo an audit and certification process to meet social and other compliance expectations.

Trends deliver

Karla McGruder, Founder of Fabrikology International said besides fundamental ethical practices such as social compliance, local suppliers need to be conscious of trends to drive their business.

This includes knowing how many seasons the customer is looking at - some may only bring out two seasonal ranges, while others may produce up to six.

Colours are also a key factor, and suppliers will fall short of the mark if they are not on point with the season's palette. She said there were a number of online resources that provide this information.

"It boils down to how you do business, and whether or not you know what the trends are in terms of your vendor's scorecard, including the materials and equipment you use," she said.

To do business with big brands, suppliers have to be a full service provider, she concluded.

The business seminar was part of Day 1 at Source Africa, the African Textile, Apparel and Footwear Trade Event taking place at the CTICC, Cape Town, from 9 to 11 June 2015. Source Africa is a showcase for African producers to illustrate their abilities to compete on price, quality, and standards to buyers from the US, Canada, Europe and Asia. For more information, visit www.sourceafrica.co.za.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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