

Why can't brands get it right?
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Reinventing

Sustainability

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By *Natalie Pavluk*

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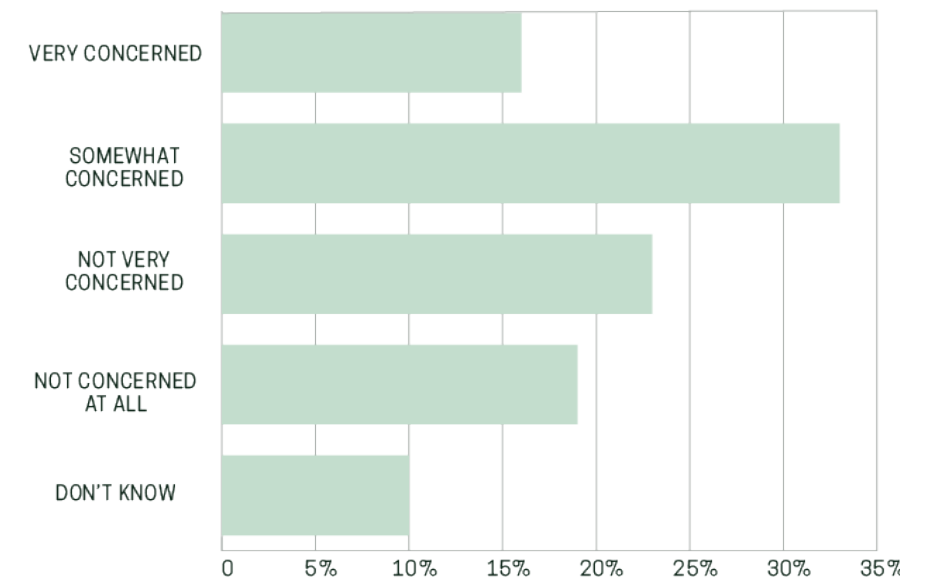
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Everything Begins with Material.

CONCERNS ABOUT HOW DAILY ACTIVITIES AFFECT THE ENVIRONMENT IN AMERICAN ADULTS WHO MAKE UNDER \$40K



On this chart, 49% of individuals who make under \$40,000 are either very concerned or somewhat concerned about their environmental impact. Lower income individuals and families do show a desire to create a positive impact on the environment yet are not getting equal opportunity to do so. These individuals should be given more accessible outlets to purchase sustainable clothing, minus the high prices. Brands like Patagonia and Reformation are praised for their ethical practices, but they sell their clothes at outrageous prices. Unnecessarily high markups should not be justified. Yet, everything begins with their materials, and how they are manufactured. So the question is:

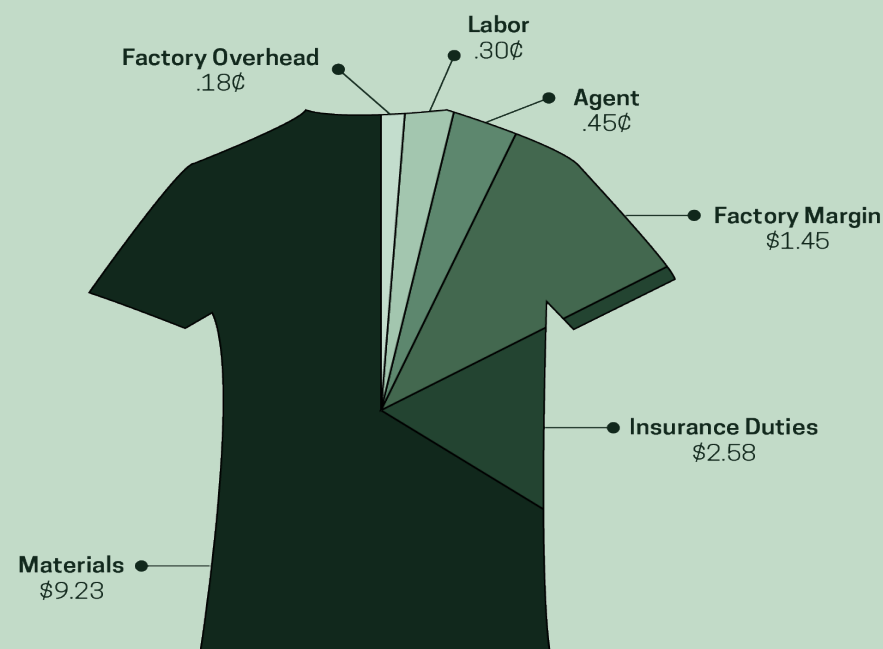
Why are most sustainable products sold at such high prices?

Material must be manufactured at fair prices, so brands can lower their mark up rates. Brands need to make their clothing accessible and affordable in order to attract more markets. If more families are willing to purchase affordable, sustainable clothing, our impact will be much greater.

Breakdown of the Average Sustainable T-Shirt

An ethically friendly shirt costs the retailer around \$14 to make. The mark up is not included in this price. Therefore sustainable brands who price their t-shirts at \$60 are clearly overpricing them, when they only cost \$14 to make. Sustainable cotton used to make shirts is sustainable in the sense that it's a natural fiber produced by plants. We can always grow more of it; it doesn't intrinsically require resources that we can't replace.

While you may know that ethical clothing is often made with more sustainable materials like organic cotton, you may not know just how much more expensive it is to produce fabrics that don't leave a trail of destruction in their wake. There are very strict federal guidelines for materials to be certified organic, from pesticide use to labor rights, which all need to be taken into account. It may seem counterintuitive, but all the chemical



\$14
*Cost to
retailer to make*

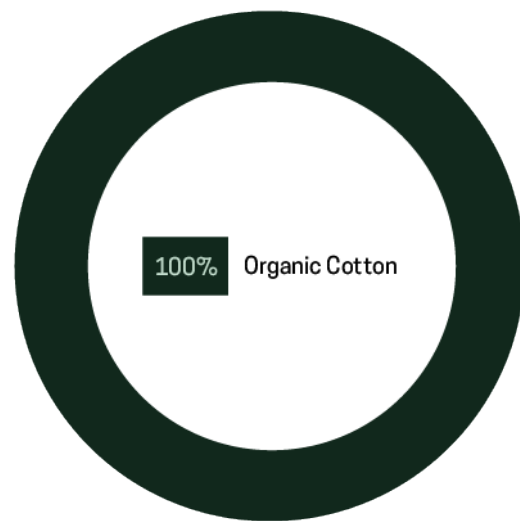
\$4
*is the cost for a retailer
to make an unethical
shirt*

“*Our mindset as consumers needs to shift away from the culture of instant gratification and materialism that often goes hand-in-hand with exploitation.*

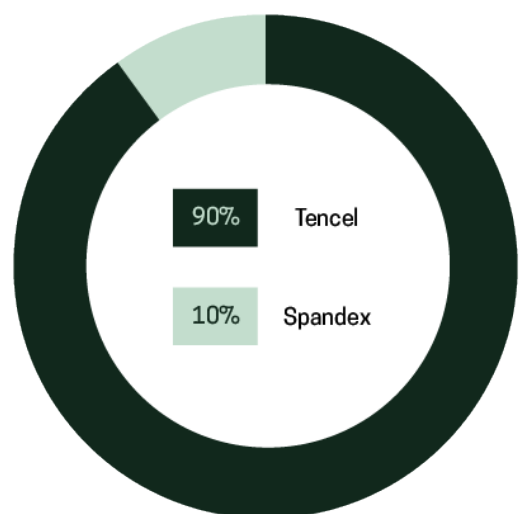
pesticides and synthetic fertilisers actually help to keep the cost down for farmers of conventionally produced fabrics. With less toxic shortcuts comes more time and effort that goes into the planting, growing, harvesting, spinning, dyeing, and cutting of sustainable materials. As for labor, With fast fashion and mass production comes the outsourcing of labor to developing nations. Without access to a living wage, workers and their families remain trapped in a cycle of poverty. By affording these garment workers not only a living wage, but also basic workplace rights that a lot of us take for granted like sick leave and reasonable work hours, the price of ethically produced clothing increases to something a little more realistic. Not to mention that ecolabels often opt to produce locally, where wages are much higher relative to the cost of living. There is so much more that goes into a price tag than the cost of the fabric. If the “true cost” of fast fashion is the decimation of our planet and the abuse of people and animals, and truly sustainable fashion is produced responsibly and invests in the future, it's a no-brainer. The unrealistic and unsustainable price points that surround us have warped our expectations as consumers.

It Is All About PROFIT

KOTN Women's Tee (\$25)



Reformation's Women's Tee (\$58)



With materials making up the bulk of the cost of a shirt, we see brands like KOTN having an average mark up of around \$10. But based on Reformation's prices, their mark up is around \$43. Because material costs are similar for these fabrics, this just shows that Reformation is choosing to mark up their prices higher than necessary. The manufacturing costs for these two materials are in the same price range. Despite having to make a profit in order to remain in business, if brands were really concerned about improving the environment, they would make their clothing accessible for all groups of people. A benefit to this is that it would widen our positive, environmental impact. Companies founded on these kinds of values and principles are indeed better suited to build deeper relations with their customers. Consumers choose brands that align with their own values and principles. Studies imply that a staggering 86% of consumers expect companies to take a stand for social causes. And they're supporting that stand with their purchases. The potential for brands matching this need is huge.



We see woke-washing everywhere. Countless companies market themselves as more conscious than what they can live up to. More organic, more balanced, more transparent, more diverse, more whatever fits this week's news cycle.



They're undermining the industry from the inside, hijacking causes and selfishly blurring the public conversation.

It threatens sustainable values as believable brand assets. Luckily, consumers are mostly quick to call out companies pushing baseless messaging. Younger generations especially experience distrust in brands. The majority- a whopping 56%- think that companies, in general, are less committed to a social cause than they claim. Companies that are committed to increasing wellbeing and genuinely want to add something good to society are much needed in the marketplace today. It is snarky sustainable brands who overcharge consumers in an attempt to drive maximum profit and ignore marginalized consumers who are looking to shop sustainably.

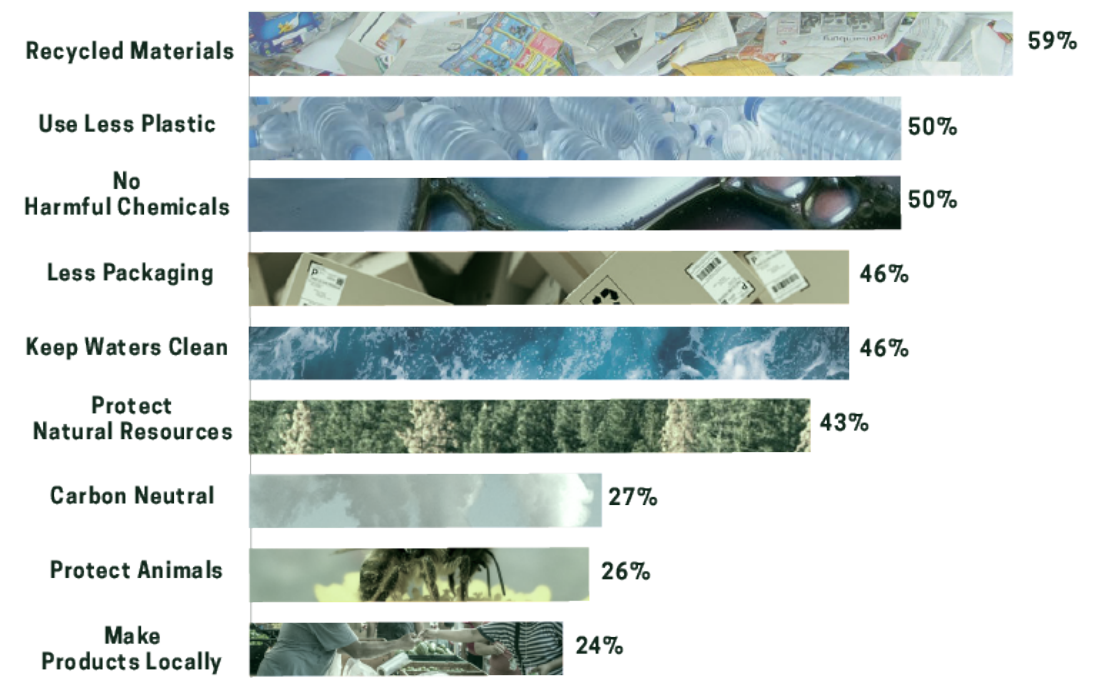
We are all concerned. We are all concerned. We are all concerned.

**We
Are
All
Concerned.**

**But are
retailers?**

We are all concerned. We are all concerned. We are all concerned.

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS BRANDS CAN SHOW THAT THEY ARE ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY?



It is clear that we no longer have the luxury of ignoring sustainable practices and climate change solutions. Trends show that consumers no longer have the patience for brands that are not focused on ethical business practices. Even governments around the world, albeit slowly, are recognizing the importance of responsible business practices that, at the very least, do not harm the environment. Unfortunately, most brands see environmental sustainability as not much beyond an opportunity to market to and retain the younger consumer audience. Millennials and Gen Zs now have the tools and information to spread the word about a brand's sustainability, and they have the knack to pick on whether a brand is intrinsically sustainable or if they are using it as just a buzz word. Building

a brand that is sustainable on all levels is now a requirement if you want to create an apposite image with the public. In a November 2018 survey commissioned by the Changing Markets Foundation, which lobbies for sustainable solutions worldwide, only 12% of consumers in the United Kingdom agreed that the fashion industry informs them about the environmental and social impact of clothes manufacturing. Two-thirds said that it's difficult to know which brands meet higher ethical standards. We need to encourage sustainable selling for all groups of people. Brands can only do this by marketing and including low income individuals in their target market. By bringing affordable, sustainable products to a mass market, major established brands can help sustain our collective future.

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