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How Trim Suppliers Are Reducing The Environmental Footprint of Jeans

By Angela Velasquez



Metabottoni CREDIT: Courtesy

The sustainability of a jean is tied to every stylistic choice that a designer makes—down to the last rivet.

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With global brands like Nudie Jeans trading in leather for Jacron patches made from recycled paper, and animal rights groups like PETA publically urging Levi's to use vegan leather patches—and going as far as purchasing the minimum number of shares in the company required to submit shareholder resolutions and to speak at annual meetings—the supply chain is taking a closer look at adopting sustainable practices and materials for trims.



Like the cotton growing, weaving and finishing that come before it, denim trim suppliers are taking measures to reduce their intake of water, chemicals, energy and raw materials.

"There is a misconception that because a trim is such a small part of the overall garment, the choice of materials doesn't matter. But it really does," said Debbie Shakespeare, Avery Dennison RBIS senior director of sustainability and compliance.

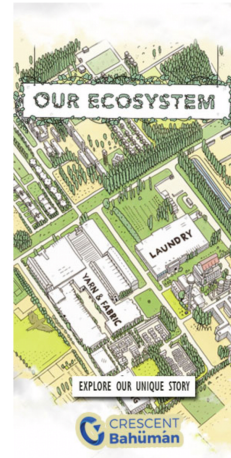
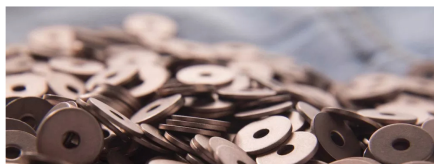
Sustainability backed by experience

As the world's largest zipper manufacturer, YKK understands its role in establishing best practices. Many brands, including YKK, which established an environmental pledge in 1994, have been implementing sustainable practices for decades but the younger generation has brought sustainability in fashion to the forefront in recent years.

Today, Miller says brands are actively looking at their production processes to find solutions to integrate sustainable processes. Initiatives such as Better Cotton Initiative and the UN Sustainable Development Goals have helped create a framework to drive the textile sector towards sustainability.

When it comes to requesting sustainable trims, suppliers say the denim and outdoor industries are ahead of other apparel categories. Brands in the denim sector are one of the pioneers in incorporating sustainable practices in their production.

In 2011, Metabottoni developed No Impact, a product line that uses recycled raw materials, no synthetic chemicals, rational use of water and energy, reduced CO2 emission and processing cycles with a low environmental impact.



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Metaltottoni raw copper

And denim stalwarts are often leading the conversation. While startup brands may have a running start by building sustainability into their DNA, brands like Levi's have examined sustainable trims for more than a decade. The brand was the first to broach the topic to Buenos Aires, Argentina-based trim supplier Apholos, which is an example in and of itself how old dogs can learn new tricks.

The 100-year-old company saves 80 percent of water by treating and reusing water from its own plating plant. "Plating metal, if not carefully done, can be highly contaminating. We recycled 100 percent all of the zinc alloy scrap generated," said Luciana Botner, Apholos' creative director. "The atmosphere of the plant and the conditions in which the employees work is also part of our sustainable policy and of course all of the above affects cost."

The company's sustainable product portfolio includes 50 percent recycled brass and copper trims and 100 percent raw zinc alloy buttons, tack made in one single piece. "They are made using 100 percent recycled zamac and simply polished with porcelain chips," Botner said. "Although our plating process is carried out with the best practices on sustainability, the fact that trims are used raw and plated at the end means less material added to the process, less footprint."

"While there has been talk about sustainability in fashion for over a decade now, we feel that in the past year there has been more interest than ever on the subject," she added.

Good practices, better designs

With no singular definition of sustainability, and each brand having its own sustainable goals, trim suppliers have to offer multiple eco alternatives.

"Often customers have not clear ideas about what they really consider sustainable," said Marco Bruno, QA compliance and corporate responsibility manager for Riri Group.

"Depending on their market segment their necessities change and, for instance, if some of them are striving to avoid plastic in all its forms, others are doing the same with metal."

To fill the wide scope of needs, the Italian zipper and button manufacturer offers zipper tape made with recycled polyester, metal components made with only renewable energy and monomaterial metal chains and zippers to improve the recyclability of components.



Riri Group

Along with sustainability, brands are seeking options that don't sacrifice creativity.

Vivolo, a leather accessories maker out of Italy, provides sustainable solutions with a wide range of non-leather eco-friendly materials derived from cellulose and textile fibers, recycled materials, silicon and many others made with low-impact production processes.

While denim brands' use of leather has come under scrutiny recently, Vivolo founder and CEO Luciano Vivolo says don't count natural leather out just yet, adding that most of the company's finished products do not require washing treatments and those that do are washed using machinery that saves 30 percent more water than standard ones.

And heat embossing, or etching—leather's most storied and efficient techniques, he added—is considered one of the most environmentally respectful, requiring only high temperature.



Vivolo

YKK has a suite of eco-friendly products developed especially for the denim industry, including the Elements collection of shank buttons and rivets that uses 89 percent less water, 46 percent less electricity, and eliminates all toxic chemicals used in finishing. YKK also offers a classic 3Y jean and other metal zippers with a Natulon tape made from 100 percent recycled PET polyester. These two products used together reduce the water, energy and chemicals used in trims, which helps to shrink a garment's overall environmental footprint.



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The company is working on new technologies such as Co2 and solution dyeing to reduce water usage and developing the next generation of metal parts finishing to eliminate the use of harmful chemicals.

"To help guide these efforts and ensure we are employing sustainable practices globally, we have established a Fastening Sustainability Department in Japan HQ focused solely on these areas. With our culture of eco innovation we strive to be a leader in sustainability for the industry," Obayashi said.

Sustainability has achieved such a critical status in the public's consciousness today that Prym Fashion CEO Brian Moore says mass market and premium brands, such as Levi's and Diesel, are using Prym's Fashion's L.I.F.E. products. "Today's consumers expect brands to offer products that are completely sustainable and show some sort of social responsibility. In our sales and development meetings, sustainability is always one of the first topics of conversation—the level of interest is overwhelming at times," Moore said.

Launched earlier this year, L.I.F.E certified fasteners are made to adhere to fewer harmful substances, eliminate heavy metals and require less material inputs and energy. Made from plastic water bottles, ecoWhite snaps eliminate the use of crude oil and associated processing compared to plastic snaps made with traditional raw materials. Meanwhile, Prym's ecoGreen snaps are made from plant-based renewable resources, such as potato starch, and reduce fossil resources and greenhouse gas emissions. These snaps, Moore added, are designed to provide the ultimate solution for a total eco-friendly package.

Up next? Moore said plastic snaps made from recycled ocean plastic, called ecoBlue, are in the works.



Prym ecoGreen

Recycled materials are piquing the interest of denim brands.

Last year, Metalbottoni launched labels made with recycled leather and recycled polyester. The materials are sourced from the waste of other processes. "Moreover, we developed a special project of a jeans button made completely in copper, which is not only recycled but can be recycled again, since it has not undergone chemical treatments," a Metalbottoni spokesperson said.

Avery Dennison's water soluble/compostable paper made with cellulose is fully dissolvable in water and has zero waste impact. Additionally, all of the company's Jacron materials use Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified fibers. "Our most recent addition to our Jacron portfolio is a thicker, pressed material that mimics the appearance of leather. It has a pressed grain that looks authentically worn," Shakespeare said.

Avery Dennison also uses food industry waste products to create fiber for labels and papers, including soybean fiber for care labels made from crushed grape, corn, citrus and algae bloom.

"Every brand is on its own sustainability journey, whether they are newly creating sustainable goals or have them embedded in their brand DNA. We see the whole spectrum," Shakespeare said.

Transparent path

The future of sustainable trims relies on consumer demand—not only for accessible, environmentally-friendly products, but also for transparency.

Leather accessories suppliers are working to correct misconceptions about how they source hides. "Not many people know that most of our production actually consists of waste material from the food industry. These leathers do not belong to protected species and we give them another purpose, avoiding them being discharged as garbage," Vivolo said. "It is crucial for our industry to keep the environmental impact as low as possible whilst maintaining a solid control over the whole supply chain and being aware of the origin of the production materials."

Avery Dennison offers digital tools that track the provenance and journey of a product and allows customers to measure the material impact of its products in the areas of water, energy and oil. "It helps our customers make sustainable choices on the products they select," Shakespeare said.

"Knowing your supply chain and how they conduct business is key to creating a more circular economy," she added. "It is important to align your brand's sustainability goals with your business partners' in order to reduce the overall impact this industry has on the environment and the world. Sustainable products don't mean you have to compromise on quality or design."

Metabottoni Sustainability trims YKK

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