





Dress the town green

Global retailer Marks & Spencer encourages its consumers to purchase sustainably, but it has also become a more resilient brand. The company's global Plan A programme has positioned the brand as one pursuing environmental and sustainable practices.

Emily Andrews reports

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of sustainability and are even beginning to expect it from quality brands such as Marks & Spencer, according to Adam Elman, global head of Plan A delivery at M&S. Plan A ("Because there is no Plan B") is a programme that has been run by global retailer Marks & Spencer for the last seven years as a long-term initiative to introduce sustainability across the entire M&S range, from food to fashion.

M&S, rather than introduce a green range, is instead choosing to incorporate sustainability into its brand. Fiona Bennie, head of sustainability at design agency, Dragon Rouge, has been



collaborating with Plan A for the last six months. She says, "It's something that will run across the whole M&S brand; it's not about them creating a green range, or an ethical range, or a Plan A range, it's about it being integrated into everything that they do, and actually that makes the journey a lot harder. They could have made a green range ages ago, and it would have been really easy. But that's not what they want to do, they're after the bigger goal of making everything that they do and everything that they make sustainable." While this is a large and ongoing task for M&S and Plan A, it is an essential step because it is what M&S customers have come to expect.

Elman explains that when M&S customers were told that all M&S fish are responsibly sourced, they were

pleased, but also, they weren't surprised, they expected it. He says, "They don't have to come into our store and worry about which is good and which is bad, they know they don't need to worry about it. So it does support the trust in our brand, and the quality credentials of our brand." Market research reveals that, both among M&S customers, but also consumers in general, the percentage of people who are either actively green, or completely uninterested, is relatively few. The vast majority think that the sustainability issue is an important one, but they want the large companies to take charge of it and make it easy for them by supplying them with the right products. When the retailer lives up to these expectations it builds trust in the brand.

Ultimately, quality and other factors sit above



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sustainability when it comes to what people look for in a product, but for M&S sustainability is quality. Elman explains, “Customers shop with us because they trust in our brand, they trust in the quality of our brand, and sustainability is absolutely fundamentally behind that. A suit can’t be really great quality if it has been made by children in a dodgy factory. So sustainability really does support what customers expect from us.”

Last year the Rana Plaza disaster and the horsemeat scandal, created huge reputational crises for fashion and food brands and showed us what can happen when a major retailer doesn’t monitor its supply chain. M&S emerged unscathed due to its ethical and sustainable sourcing. With technology making faster sharing and instant broadcasting possible, it is more important than ever for brands to safeguard their reputations through attention to detail. Elman says, “It is very much about working in collaboration with our suppliers to make sure that they are meeting our standards.”

Sustainability also makes smart business sense. M&S and Dragon Rouge have released a report called *Fortune Favours the Brave*, revealing that businesses could make £100bn a year by embracing sustainability. Thus the Plan A ‘shwopping’ partnership with Oxfam is both a powerful fundraiser, but also a strategic business plan. The initiative tackles the clothes to landfill issue by encouraging M&S customers to recycle their clothes in store, Oxfam then sells the clothes. This has the dual benefit of sending fewer clothes to landfills and raising money for the Oxfam charity. M&S is also able to upcycle the unsold items by turning

them into fibre and creating new garments from the old.

Elman says this is also beneficial for the M&S brand, “When you consider the resource constraints that we increasingly see, there is more demand for those resources coupled with the fact that you have got these big weather impacts, and other issues, so that some of these materials are quite volatile in terms of their price and availability. We now have a steady stream of material coming back that we can turn into new product. That makes us a far more resilient business and is starting to close the loop on garments.” While Elman admits that this is currently operating on a small scale, it is part of a development of the M&S brand and reflects an open-mindedness to changes within the business model that could be beneficial for the company in the future. Recognising that resource constraints and carbon impact can impact mainstream business in the future has thus benefited M&S in terms of both brand reputation and internal resilience.

As well as providing sustainable products, Plan A gets involved with events across the UK that bring the public together for a good cause. The company partners with the Marine Conservation Society for its annual Big Beach Clean-up, encouraging people across the country to beautify and clean canals and beaches. It also sponsored World Coffee Morning alongside Macmillan Cancer Support. Elman says, “Our customers really do engage with these opportunities and these activities. If we can make it really easy for people, in an engaging way, then they want to get involved, and that’s where we think we have real opportunity with our brand.”

