

A Case Study of the Rehauling of Sustainable Workwear by EcoWearMe, Aotearoa (New Zealand)

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Abstract

Sustainability focuses on meeting the needs of the present without jeopardizing future generations' ability to meet their own needs. It is built on four main pillars: economic, environmental, social and essence - also known colloquially as profits, planet, people and purpose a Company serves. Organizations are increasingly making public commitments to sustainability by reducing waste, investing in renewable energy, and working towards a more viable future. The aim of this research paper is to delve into sustainability in apparels as this Industry is a major contributor of depletion of natural resources. The focal point of the research is centered around rebranding of a semi-fictitious clothing Company EcoWearMe which sells sustainable workwear to other Companies. The researcher has particularly focused on how EcoWearMe can better position themselves in the market by rebranding and how other Companies can benefit from sustainable workwear for their employees. The research paper also aims to outlines the strategic responses and implementation plans to assist EcoWearMe overcome identified business challenges.

Keywords: Sustainability, Workwear, Rebranding, Market position.

Introduction

EcoWearMe is a retail company which was established over 80 years ago in Aotearoa. Their client base comprises of several manual labor intense Companies across multiple Industries like Dairy factories, Fast food franchises and Forestry (Loop WorkWear, 2021). Their product line mainly comprises of providing sustainable workwear. From the initial brief to the delivery of the personalized merchandise, their focus is unwavering. The Company values their customers image and in adherence to this commitment, EcoWearMe specializes in designing customized sustainable workwear from their extensive stock range (Loop WorkWear, 2021). The focus of EcoWearMe is to ensure that the brand of their customers is easily identifiable, and their design team collaborates seamlessly to provide a holistic customer experience. Their designers provide sustainable fabrication options and always include the most up-to-date fabric and design technology, allowing their garments to evolve with the times (Loop WorkWear, 2021). The main motto for EcoWearMe to produce sustainable workwear was being aware that clothing production accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions (Deane Apparel, 2021).

Apparel industry is one of the world's most polluting industries, second only to oil. As a result, astute brands are consciously selecting sustainable workwear options for various reasons like image enhancement of brand, gaining competitive advantage, being compliant with increased

business regulations, increasing awareness around sustainability for stakeholders, reducing waste and supporting the environment (Deane Apparel, 2021). The marketing environmental analysis has revealed that EcoWearMe faces a variety of threats, including declining revenues and market share, a weakened competitive edge, and changing consumer behaviors. As a result of these threats, the Company requires to step outside of its comfort zone and shift its strategies to better understand these market changes which will create more opportunities for major strategic changes in marketing, pricing, location, and possible internationalization (Cashmere Company NZ, n.d). The aim of this Research paper is to analyze the concept of sustainability and its implementation in a fabric industry. The researcher has chosen the workwear fabric to examine how sustainability can assist the Company in establishing a dominant market position and align their business goals with the elements of quadruple bottom line.

Research Problem

While EcoWearMe continues to expand domestically, it is also battling with challenges brought about by both internal and external factors in recent months as evidenced in the Literature review. Like any other organization, they are also guided by corporate values and philosophies that influence its decisions, strategies, and directions. As a long-standing industry participant, the Company is almost resistant to change and prefers to stick to its old marketing philosophy: produce high-quality products under a recognized brand name at affordable (but not cheap) prices and advertise through word-of-mouth. This has resulted in a decrease in their revenues and overall profits by over 20% in last financial year of 2020 - 2021. There has also been a substantial decrease in their market share as other their main competitors diversified their sustainable apparels range to include fashion wear, handbags, formal shoes and uniforms. In the midst of these business setbacks, EcoWearMe announced the creation of a new marketing department and the promotion of their veteran John Glenfield as its Head. Aside from these changes, EcoWearMe also resorted to job reduction and price markdowns to manage its worsening portfolio. This clearly shows that EcoWearMe needs to have proactive strategies rather than restoring to being reactive in dealing with its business situation. They need to have a lucid pathway to gradually embark on a journey towards the suggested changes which are expected to bring the Company back in the game.

Literature Review

The framework of Sustainability in Aotearoa:

In the corporate world sustainability refers to the impact that businesses have on the environment or society. A sustainable business strategy seeks to positively impact one or both areas, thereby contributing to the resolution of some of the world's most pressing issues (Chladek, 2019). Some of the global issues that sustainable business strategies aid in addressing are changes in the climate, inequality of income, natural resource depletion, concerns about human rights, working conditions that are reasonable, pollution, injustice based on race and inequality between men and women (Chladek, 2019).

Many modern businesses have adopted the quadruple bottom line (QBL), which suggests that organizations should consider their impact on profits, people, planet, and purpose (Mukherjee & Banerjee, 2021). Quite often, this long-term approach to business improves business performance. Spending more money on sustainable business practices may appear counter intuitive to increasing a company's profitability, but studies show that the most sustainable companies are also the most

profitable. Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics are frequently used to assess an organization's ethical and sustainable practices (Clementino & Perkins, 2021). Companies with high ESG ratings consistently outperform the market in both the medium and long term. While sustainability strategies may be a short-term investment, they can result in long-term benefits (Clementino & Perkins, 2021).

In September 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets known as Agenda 2030 which integrated the three main pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental and are applicable to all countries (United Nations, n.d.). The goals were of having no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, proper industry, innovation, and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, sustainable life under water and on land, peace, justice and strong institutions and partnerships for the goals (United Nations, n.d.). Aotearoa committed to contributing to these goals' achievement through a combination of domestic action, international leadership on global policy issues, and assistance to developing countries through the Aotearoa Aid Programme (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d). Government agencies in Aotearoa review these goals and their alignment with government priorities. The private sector and civil society also contribute and are working with government agencies to achieve the SDGs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d).

Aotearoa has achieved substantial goodwill through its influence on global policy by eliminating subsidies for fisheries that contribute to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, removing fossil-fuel subsidies, promoting an open, rules-based trading system under the World Trade Organization (WTO), promoting the interests of small island developing states, encouraging people to join the Global Research Alliance and keeping a special focus on ocean issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d). Through its focus on sustainable economic development and complementary investments in education, health, governance, and resilience, the Aotearoa Aid Programme is well positioned to fulfill the SDGs. The reputation of Aotearoa as a country with a clean and green environment is priceless. Failure to protect it through inaction on sustainability poses a significant economic risk to the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d).

The importance of Sustainable Workwear:

Workwear is clothing worn to perform manual labor, so it must be durable and long-lasting. These garments may also need to be made of tear-resistant materials to keep the wearer from cutting or grazing themselves in the workplace. In industries where employees are required to wear workwear, it is the employer's responsibility to provide workwear, which typically includes the company logo (My personalised clothing, 2018). Workwear materials are subjected to numerous tests for toughness, washing, grazing, seam and pilling, perspiration, and tensile force to ensure they can withstand the wearer's daily tasks. It is imperative to incorporate sustainability into the process of creating workwear. Several businesses are now conscious of the total footprint of a product when selecting workwear for their employees (Kok, 2020).

It is critical to understand which parties are involved in the entire value chain process of creating sustainable workwear. The first link are the fabric manufacturers which assist in selecting the right fabric based on a Company's safety, comfort, and uniformity standards. (Kok, 2020) The second

link is the manufacturer who oversees designing and producing the desired clothing. The third link is the industrial laundries which ensure that the garments are cared for in terms of washing and repairing, ensuring that they last the expected lifespan. The ability to trace the origin of all materials used in the production of workwear and comprehend their full environmental impact, from production to logistics, has become so important to end users that it is frequently used as a selection criterion (Kok, 2020).

EcoWearMe's mission is to offer consumer service, quality, and value. They realize that every corporate customer has different needs, from tailored suits to standards-compliant high visibility day-night overalls, they strive to provide quality work wear which is both functional and stylish (Loop WorkWear, 2021). Their aim is to bring the customers brand to life in an environmentally friendly workwear which their employees will adore. EcoWearMe constantly innovate their patterns to ensure that their fabric is of best quality. They acknowledge that workwear is an important part of their customer's brand. They support their customers to increase their brand visibility in an environmentally friendly manner which would augment their commitment to sustainable practices (Deane Apparel, 2021).

They produce truly sustainable clothing from Lyocell which is a certified compostable fabric that eliminates the need for garment end-of-life solutions, Bio Cotton which combines organic cotton and 100 percent recycled polyester to create the ideal high-quality workwear fabric, Recycled polyester that can reduce global waste by using a fabric made entirely of recycled plastic PET bottles and Merino Wool which is a naturally renewable and biodegradable fibre that is suitable for all seasons (Loop WorkWear, 2021). Through their Global Recycled Standard certified recycled polyester fabric, they are able to reduce waste by giving plastic PET bottles a second life. Furthermore, their 100 percent compostable Lyocell and Organic cotton takes only 3 months and 6 months respectively to compost (Loop WorkWear, 2021).

Sustainability and Market Position:

The connection between sustainability and marketing is constantly evolving. Green marketing, cause marketing, ethical marketing, sustainability marketing, mission marketing, sustainability communications, social brand, purpose-driven brands, meaningful brands, sustainable brands are some of the marketing terms which are in vogue (Upton, 2016). The significance of aligning a company's marketing strategy, messaging, and activations with its sustainability and responsible business practices and behaviors is being recognized by most of the companies. There is a greater awareness now of businesses' ability to incorporate sustainability into marketing practices which enables a shift in consumer mindset and influence their purchase decision making (Upton, 2016). There is an emergence of a new hybrid of consumer-facing marketing purposes, strategies, communications, and activations which are empowering consumers to make more responsible decisions (Upton, 2016).

Consumers in Aotearoa are aware of importance of sustainability and at least 47% of them consider sustainability when selecting a brand or product to purchase (Sustainable Business Council, 2019). One-fifth of all customers deem sustainability to be one of the most important factors in their purchase decision making (Sustainable Business Council, 2019). Other factors include quality and price. New Zealanders want brands across all industries to be more open and upfront about sustainability with active communication about their efforts. This data assists a Company to

establish their market position as a leader, follower, or imitator and incorporate sustainability into their strategies and operations (Sustainable Business Council, 2019).

Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility strategy:

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy of EcoWearMe has an impact in the areas of ethical supply chain, sustainable apparel and community welfare. Under ethical supply chain EcoWearMe expects its offshore factory suppliers to provide minimum workplace conditions such as freedom to work, zero tolerance for modern slavery and child labor, fair wages, and reasonable working conditions (Deane Apparel, 2021). Centralink, a global Total Quality Assurance provider, independently audits these suppliers for them using the international Workplace Conditions Assessment to ensure that the stipulated regulations are enforced (Deane Apparel, 2021). To ensure the commitment towards sustainable apparel the goal of EcoWearMe is to implement sensible sustainability which is affordable and comprises of high-performance fabrics that meet the growing demand for environmentally friendly workwear (Deane Apparel, 2021). EcoWearMe introduced a sustainable fabric to customers for the first time in 2006 and have since come a long way.

Natural or recycled fibres now account for half of their fabrics. Community welfare has always been a prime concern for the Company, and they have been donating clothes and fabrics to charities and schools for over 30 years (Deane Apparel, 2021). Some of the charities they are assisting include The Salvation Army, Dress for Success, and the Auckland City Mission (Deane Apparel, 2021). They also provide design expertise and sourcing advice to the sustainable menstrual products social enterprise Liberate, as well as financial support to several charities in Australasia. In addition, every year, all EcoWearMe employees are given the opportunity to volunteer for a charity of their choice through their volunteer programme (Deane Apparel, 2021).

Sustainability and Business Goals:

To achieve the Company's stated goals and objectives, EcoWearMe relies on five main business principles of maintaining a stable and long-term relationship with its suppliers, providing and utilizing local support, offering products at affordable prices, promoting the brand within and investing in their employees by providing training and ensuring their wellbeing (Alon, 2000). To align sustainability with these business principles, EcoWearMe began replacing individual garment bags with plastic box liners ten years ago and are now on a mission to either eliminate plastic packaging entirely or replace it with recyclable and compostable materials (Loop WorkWear, 2021). By removing plastic components from their garment packaging in 2018, they saved 1.7 million plastic bags, 32,000 collar stays, 32,000 butterflies, and 60,000 pegs from the landfill (Loop WorkWear, 2021).

EcoWearMe was also able to repurpose their clothing by collaborating with textile reuse company Jusmary. They provided customized take-back options to customers, such as re-exporting non-branded clothing to developing countries, recycling other garments into yarn, and converting used clothing into automobile interior components (Deane Apparel, 2021). They also focused on going green in the workplace. They reduced the need for artificial lighting by retrofitting their warehouse with high-transparency roofing materials (Deane Apparel, 2021). All their offices have recycling bins and have switched to low-energy LED lighting. With such initiatives the Company posted a profit of over \$2 million in FY 2019 – 2020 and won several awards from Government for their dedication to conservation of environment (Deane Apparel, 2021).

Marketing Environmental analysis of EcoWearMe:

EcoWearMe's internal analysis revealed several key strengths. They have widespread support among Aotearoa producers, consumers, and workers. Since its inception, EcoWearMe has committed to adhere to several operating principles in order to achieve the Company's mission (Loop WorkWear, 2021). These principles include developing and maintaining relationships with local suppliers, providing customers with high-quality designs at reasonable prices, supporting Aotearoa's retail industry, and promoting employees internally for open positions in the company. These practices have proven to be effective in gaining the trust and support of Aotearoa producers, consumers, and workers (Loop WorkWear, 2021). One of their strengths is that they offer high-quality products at reasonable prices. EcoWearMe's decision to rely solely on Aotearoa textile manufacturers has aided them in overseeing the quality and pricing of production, as well as the efficiency of manufacturing and distribution (Agarwal, 2013). Another point in their favor is their business model, which consists of franchise agreements with partners with local retail expertise. In its pursuit of dominance in the domestic market, the Company was able to form alliances with local retailers in various districts who have extensive experience and significant market share through partnerships (Dawar & Frost, 1999).

Poor promotion tactics are one of their areas for improvement, as the company has relied solely on word-of-mouth advertising for years. Because EcoWearMe was confident in its recognizable brand in Aotearoa's retail industry, the company did not invest heavily in advertising and relied heavily on word-of-mouth advertising (Aotearoa Advertising Industry, 2019). Another area which needs improvement is better Inventory control. Stakeholders and business analysts have chastised EcoWearMe for inefficient inventory control, which is thought to have resulted in the company underperforming other retailers by more than 25% in the last financial year. A complete reliance on the Aotearoa market and the Company's operating principle of only partnering with local suppliers has stopped them from diversifying into multi segments or exploring expansion in other countries (Commerce Commission Aotearoa, 2019).

The external analysis of EcoWearMe revealed several opportunities, the most prominent of which is to develop a separate clothing line for the retail customers as there is an increased awareness around importance of sustainable environment and eco-friendly options among general customers. The Company must utilize an online advertising platform coupled with assertive personal selling to enable them to create a new marketing space and thus reach new retail and business customers respectively and also re-energize the existing customers. Developing a separate clothing line for the retail customers while retaining their signature sustainable workwear for businesses will balance the needs of every customer. Another opportunity for EcoWearMe is to examine their store layout and size standards to adhere to economies of scale. Currently, the average store size of the Company is 25,000 square feet which is not economical. If the company wants to achieve economies of scale, where unit costs decrease as output increases, it must review and research the optimal store-footage and capacity (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2018).

EcoWearMe is threatened by tough competitors as there are more competitors sprouting around domestically. Aotearoa government has a commitment towards sustainability and businesses are encouraged to indulge in it proactively (Skinner, 2021). This has led to other apparel companies like Soft Touch Limited and Flourish Inc to become their major competitors in sustainable

workwear. These competitors are also having a product line for retail customers something which EcoWearMe needs to respond to promptly to maintain market share and profitability (Kaplan, 2013). Another threat emerges from recent economic changes and recession due to Covid – 19 which has EcoWearMe’s sales to plummet, putting a significant strain on their profitability in the domestic markets (Brende, 2020). Due to these dynamic market trends and consumer behaviour the Company needs to be agile to sustain in a competitive market and fulfilling customer demands.

Research Methodology

The researcher has relied on secondary data collection for the purpose of this research paper due to the nature of the content. The data on sustainability, ecofriendly fabrics and rebranding was readily available on various platforms like online websites of the Companies taken as a base for this semi – fictitious paper, Aotearoa government sustainability websites, Marketing journals, books, and periodicals. The researcher also checked articles and journals from EBSCO library database which had key research material. This repository held vital information and documents from which data was extracted. The researcher investigated thoroughly these various sources of information to ensure that the criteria of reliability, suitability and adequacy are maintained.

Based on the research the following objectives were framed:

- To analyze the importance and implementation of sustainability in a retail fabric Company.
- To conduct a competitor analysis of the Company to understand their current market position.
- To provide recommendations to the Company for upholding its market leader position by being both eco-friendly and technology savvy.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Based on the literature review and research problems, the researcher recommends the following key strategies for EcoWearMe to bounce back as a Market leader.

Vertical business integration:

To advance to the next level of business, a forwards or backwards integration plan for the current business's external processes is required. Integration provides a cost advantage as well as a lead time advantage (Sarkar, 2019). EcoWearMe must invest in processing rather than just in fabric imports. They can consider integrating with process houses through a formal agreement of committed production off-take or by investing capital in acquiring an equity stake. The funds thus made available can be used for procuring more quality sustainable fabrics from the major sourcing countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and China (Berg & Hedrich, 2014).

Improved service and on-time in full (OTIF):

Building trust with buyers entails more than simply responding to their e-mail inquiries on time. Buyers must be assured that their order will be received in full and on time (OTIF- On Time In Full) (Sarkar, 2019). Manufacturing and infrastructure can be replicated, but great service is extremely difficult to replicate. If EcoWearMe focuses on this aspect this, they can excel in customer delight and this can become a truly distinguishing feature. They must also transition from providing only a product to providing a product plus service bundle that can take care of a large

portion of what the supplier must do (Sarkar, 2019). This can include pre-production pattern development, prototype development, production monitoring, in-house inspection and testing, and shipment auditing (Berg & Hedrich, 2014).

Enhance sustainable working environment to boost revenue growth:

EcoWearMe should consider novel human resource practices in order to make their organizations a magnet for the country's brightest talents. Employees form the core of Quadrapule Bottom Line sustainability, and the work environment must encourage them to be creative (Colbert & Kurucz, n.d). Senior management should also give their employees a patient hearing because they may be brimming with radical ideas that could provide an innovative new method or even a breakthrough (Colbert & Kurucz, n.d).

Establishing a planning department or strengthening an existing one:

Production planning and control (PPC) is an important part of the manufacturing process. Last-minute changes in the name of flexibility may be accepted in some orders, but not in the vast majority (Sarkar, 2019). EcoWearMe must acknowledge that once production has begun, their customers still need to be provided flexibility to any changes in specifications. At the factory level, there must be a senior person in charge of PPC because this function has a significant impact on factory efficiencies and OTIFs (Sarkar, 2019).

Improving Search Engine Marketing Strategy:

As competitors compete for the attention of quality traffic, competition will be fierce. EcoWearMe must enhance their search engine marketing (SEM) strategy (Schwegler, 2021). They can take the “Moneyball” approach wherein they do not have to go out and procure the big-hitter search keywords. Instead, they can look for more specific keywords related to the various assortments in their catalogue (Schwegler, 2021). If they can capitalize on a list of these words, they will undoubtedly drive more qualified traffic at a lower cost.

Payment Options Should Be Diversified:

EcoWearMe must offer more diverse options to their customers for payment. They can offer third-party payment options to increase conversions. In 2020 a surge in the number of alternative payment providers was witnessed (Schwegler, 2021). According to a joint report by Baymard and Amazon Payments, 83% of the top 60 grossing commerce sites in the United States and around the world accept third-party payments. They also discovered that nearly 10% of shoppers abandon carts due to a lack of payment options. This is a significant value addition regardless of whether it is Venmo, Paypal, Klarna, or another option (Schwegler, 2021).

Semantic Vector for avoiding Null Results

With advanced technology to improve customers experiences EcoWearMe can map a data infrastructure that aligns their product catalogue and fabrics to popular queries and even items which they want to surface for specific campaigns and stock pushes (Schwegler, 2021). It is essentially a method of connecting similar products to surface items in their catalogue that will have a high conversion rate when attached to certain search queries. When the search engine returns no results, semantic vector search goes out and finds products that meet the customer's needs (Schwegler, 2021).

Customized Marketing campaign for retail customers:

Another suggestion for EcoWearMe is to have a seasonal collection campaign for their retail customers, such as the "Wish Cashmere" Knitwear or the "Perfect Office" pants (Cashmere Company NZ, n.d). They can have special marketing campaigns for women, such as "Faux Fur" for the winter, "Suede Wear" for the autumn/spring, and "Beach Wear" for the summer. As part of their rebranding campaign, for men they can introduce new clothing campaign such as "Buttoned Cardigans" (Cashmere Company NZ, n.d). Aside from that, EcoWearMe can also develop strategies for special events such as Valentine's Day and Christmas to increase sales. They can do so by offering discounts on these days, making them a preferred store for customers (Deane Apparel, 2021). During Christmas, they can offer discounts on a different type of product every day and during Easter, they can host an Easter Egg Hunt in their stores and award winners with a discount code on clothing that is appropriate for the occasion to encourage purchases (Deane Apparel, 2021).

Conclusion

With the rise of apparel industry has come the inevitable backlash from increasingly environmentally conscious businesses and consumers who want to know exactly what goes into making the clothes they buy either for employees or themselves (Duke University, n.d). As a result, clothing companies are being now increasingly focusing on the fabrics they produce. The farm-to-closet movement aims to track the manufacturing process of fabrics from beginning to end in the hope that increased transparency will combat poor working conditions and the industry's environmental impact on the planet. Sustainable clothes including workwear in which Companies accept responsibility for the resources they consume, is gaining traction (Duke University, n.d). EcoWearMe must focus on enhancing their existing and potential business customer's relationship by leveraging on their sustainable workwear and introducing new products for gaining retail customers. They must rebrand themselves to increase the appeal and value of their products. To accomplish this, they must focus on several strategies in tandem as outlined in the recommendations. This will enable them to improve their current product line and be responsive to the consumer's needs and emerge as market leader in the sustainable apparel industry.

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