

LIFE & STYLE

The Latest Trend at Fashion Houses? ‘Sustainability’ Experts

Big fashion houses are hiring sustainability experts amid concerns, particularly among socially conscious young people, about the industry’s environmental toll



Shona Quinn, seen at the Eileen Fisher showroom in Los Angeles last week, has led the company’s sustainability efforts since 2007. Ms. Quinn looks for materials that meet Eileen Fisher’s environmental standards. PHOTO: DAVID WALTER BANKS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Ray A. Smith

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One of the buzziest jobs in the fashion industry is also one of the least glamorous. The title is sustainability director or chief sustainability officer—a relatively new role more likely to be held by a policy wonk than a follower of runway trends.

“I like fashion but I am not a fashionista,” said Marie-Claire Daveu, chief sustainability officer and head of international institutional affairs at Kering, the Paris-based company that owns Gucci, Saint Laurent, Balenciaga and other luxury brands.

Big fashion houses are hiring environmental experts and beefing up their sustainability departments amid concerns, particularly among socially conscious young consumers, about the industry’s toll on the environment.

Sustainability directors tend to handle matters that are more gritty than glitzy. At upscale women's clothing label Eileen Fisher, sustainability leader Shona Quinn has traveled to northern France and a remote corner of northern China to visit cotton and flax farmers and goat herders. To reach a cashmere goat farm in the arid Alashan region of northern China, she and her colleagues had to make three plane connections and a six-hour drive, she said. Ms. Quinn, who has held the job since 2007, uses the travel to check out cotton, cashmere and other materials that meet the company's environmental standards. She discusses water efficiency and waste with factory leaders and farmers and tries to persuade some of them to change their practices.

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—David Hayer, Gap's senior vice president of global sustainability

At
PVH
Corp.,
owner

of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, Chief Risk Officer Melanie Steiner's responsibilities include overseeing internal audit and cybersecurity as well as human rights and environmental issues. Know-how is essential when advising executives on being more sustainable, she said. “You have to earn the right to go in and be able to ask for” changes in business practices, Ms. Steiner said. “You have to understand the business and come in with a business case.”

Otherwise, sustainability chiefs risk being dismissed as the office's preachy—but unrealistic—advocate for the environment.

“I wasn't the ‘green guy’ until maybe in the last year or so,” said David Hayer, who became Gap's senior vice president of global sustainability in June. For three years, Mr. Hayer had managed the company's global supply chain from New Delhi, and spent many years before that in various operations roles. That experience reassures others at Gap—which has committed to 100% of the cotton it uses being sustainable by 2021—that he knows the business reasons for going greener, he said. “We approach a lot of what we're doing with data,” said Mr. Hayer, who also is president of Gap Foundation, which supports communities where Gap does business. “We tie it to business as much as we can. That helps alleviate ‘the green guy is here’ mindset.”

Base salaries for sustainability experts at large fashion companies range between \$200,000 and \$300,000 for a vice president to between \$350,000 and \$500,000 for a chief sustainability officer, said Karen Harvey, chief executive of Karen Harvey Consulting Group, an executive-search and advisory firm specializing in fashion and retail. Responsibilities vary from company to company, with some sustainability roles encompassing human rights as well as environmental concerns.



David Hayer became Gap's senior vice president of global sustainability in June, after holding various operations roles at the company including three years managing its global supply chain from New Delhi. PHOTO: KELLY FLANAGAN/GAP INC.

Having a sustainability expert on staff signals that a company is taking environmental matters seriously. However, individuals with sustainability expertise and fashion-industry experience aren't easy to find. "They have to understand the back end, from design to purchasing of raw materials to product development to manufacturing," Ms. Harvey said. "Those people have to have a blend of art and science...and they also have to be grounded in business." Some fashion companies have recruited sustainability professionals from other industries.

In October, German fashion house Hugo Boss named its first director of global sustainability. The new hire, Andreas Streubig, had been director of the sustainability-management section at retail and services firm Otto Group in Hamburg.

Before Ms. Daveu joined Kering in 2012, she worked in the public sector, as chief of staff to French politician Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet in the ministry of ecology and other areas. Her résumé includes a stint as senior director of sustainable development at what was then known as the Sanofi-Aventis Group. At Kering, Ms. Daveu works with the company's brands and departments on sustainability goals. She consults scientists on biodiversity, climate change, animal welfare and toxic emissions from manufacturing and collaborates with nongovernmental organizations and fashion schools on sustainable projects. Ms. Daveu also visits farmers and raw-materials suppliers to discuss implementing the company's sustainability standards. Last year, Kering set goals to reduce its environmental footprint by 40% and its greenhouse-gas emissions by 50% by



Marie-Claire Daveu, chief sustainability officer at Kering, worked in the French government before joining the Paris-based company in 2012. **PHOTO:** CHRISTOPHER STURMAN

2025.

Sustainability is chic at H&M, Zara and other fast-fashion brands often criticized for generating waste by making inexpensive clothes that some shoppers wear only a few times. Zara's parent company Inditex has a sustainability team of about 150 people led by Chief Sustainability Officer Félix Poza.

Many small clothiers can't afford to hire sustainability chiefs. Instead, some have adopted conservation practices such as banning plastic bottles from the office. At Prabal Gurung, a New York maker of dresses that are red-carpet favorites, the 15-person staff recently stopped printing documents. Prabal Gurung emailed invitations to its February runway show instead of sending printed ones—a first for the nine-year-old house. Co-founder Caitlin DiStefano said she has been attending industry talks on sustainability and is working with experts to do more.