

# 3 points of advice you can share as to how anyone can adopt *ethical-fashion*

- *buy ethical clothes on a manageable budget*
- *stop buying crap*
- *expect transparent labelling*

# A complete guide to buying ethical clothes on a budget

If you're keen to fill your closet with inexpensive clothes you can feel good about, this list is a good place to start. Companies like Everlane, Allbirds, Rent the Runway, and American Giant are leading the way, but so are some lesser known brands like MATE, Nisolo, and Blu & Blue.

The world is addicted to cheap, crappy clothes. Thanks to low-wage manufacturing in poor countries and the rise of fast fashion, clothes have morphed from being valuable possessions to disposable items that we chuck out at the end of the season.

Brands across the fashion industry learned how to make and sell products at rock bottom prices. The cost of apparel has been spiralling [downward for decades now](#). Fast-fashion labels like H&M and Zara set new lows for the industry with their model of selling inexpensive, on-trend items that consumers would only wear a few times before tossing out. And retailers like Walmart and Target have had to play into this model to keep up with customers' expectations. But when you consider the terrible environmental and human impact of manufacturing such cheap clothes, it's clear that the price tag only tells one small part of story.

The main way to reduce the cost of manufacturing is to use cheap labour, which often means relying on factories in developing countries, where working conditions are often less regulated. Seventy million people around the world work in clothing manufacturing, the majority of whom are women. When these workers are overseas, it can be very hard for brands to track whether they are paid a living wage, given reasonable hours or production targets, and allowed to work in a safe environment. Sometimes, brands themselves don't realize they were using child labour or even indentured labour to make products, because their factories are so far removed from the brand headquarters.



It's the low cost of production that also leads to some of the most egregious pollution problems as well. By some estimates, the fashion industry is the [second most polluting](#) industry in the world, after the petroleum sector. Fashion brands have relied on increasingly less expensive material from low-quality polyester to cheap cotton. Of course, since the clothes are designed to be obsolete after a few wears, it doesn't matter if they will fall apart quickly. There are many other pollution problems, like coloring fabrics using toxic dyes, or tanning leather using toxic chemicals. But perhaps the most problematic part of all is that, as consumers, we're cycling through more clothes than we need, partly because they're designed to fall apart quickly, and partly because they're so cheap, it's worth making room in our closets for new items.

Over the last couple of years, I've written extensively about how our clothes are damaging the earth and harming human beings in other countries, and I've been finding brands that are fighting back against the status quo to create clothes in a more responsible way. I've also received many emails from readers who are keen to change their shopping habits, but believe that buying from ethical brands is out of their price range. I can see where they are coming from. Shopping ethically has often been perceived as a luxury, because the price points of ethical brands are on par with those of upmarket designers. It's wrapped up in a particular urban, millennial lifestyle that is synonymous with buying \$90 Goop vitamins, eating at hip farm-to-table restaurants, and buying exclusively organic produce at farmers' markets.

There's some truth to this. It does cost more to manufacture clothing ethically. Responsible manufacturing involves paying workers more, using higher-quality materials, and making sure the factory pollutes as little as possible. And in some ways, there's no getting around it. Choosing to shop ethically will mean nixing your dependence on cheap, throwaway clothes. Instead, you will have to train yourself to buy fewer but longer-lasting products.

But the good news is that there are more and more ethical brands entering the market, creating entirely traceable supply chains, so you can learn about who made your clothes, whether they were paid a living wage, and if their working conditions were safe. This influx of new brands are using higher-quality, sustainable materials to lower the environmental impact of the manufacturing process. And contrary to the fast-fashion ethos, many of these responsible brands are creating classic clothes and encouraging customers to wear them season after season.

Until now, many ethical brands have been small, niche businesses, which meant that they didn't have access to the efficiencies that come with producing at scale. But things are beginning to change. These brands are growing and building larger consumer bases, which will allow them to start reducing the cost of manufacturing.

Take [MATE](#), a label founded by Kayti O'Connell Carr. Carr was tired of hearing about fashion's devastating impact. So she launched a T-shirt brand with a vintage aesthetic that's been picked up by retailers such as Urban Outfitters. Carr makes all her products in the L.A. Garment District where she can keep an eye on workers, to make sure they are treated well. And she only uses certified organic cotton that is durable enough to wear for years. As a small, five-year-old startup, Carr's T-shirts are at a high price point, starting at \$68. But she hopes to bring prices down over time, as her orders go up and she can take advantage of economies of scale. "I think my clothes are priced fairly given how much we spend on raw materials and labour," she says. "It's expensive to make clothes sustainably. But over time, as the brand grows, I want to find ways to bring the prices down, to be even more accessible."

Buying from brands that don't pollute the earth or contribute to human suffering should not be a luxury. And until more consumers feel they can afford to buy clothes from values-driven socially conscious brands, it is hard to fundamentally change the problems in the fashion industry. To help you in your own ethical shopping adventures, I've compiled a list of brands that will allow you to shop responsibly, while still keeping an eye on your budget. This is by no means a comprehensive list—there are many other great brands out there—but these are brands whose products I've researched and can vouch for.



### **BUY CLASSIC, VERSATILE, DURABLE CLOTHES**

**American Giant**, a San Francisco-based startup, wants to make indestructible clothes. The company's founder, Bayard Winthrop, wanted to bring manufacturing back to the U.S., partly to ensure that workers would be properly treated, but also because he wanted to make high-quality clothes that America was once known for when brands like Levi's and Fruit of the Loom still manufactured products in the country. It's best known for its very first product, a \$108 sweatshirt that has been dubbed the best hoodie in the world. But it's expanded into other products like pants, dresses, shorts, and bags. While none of the products are as cheap as fast fashion, they are meant to provide good value given how durable they are. T-shirts, for instance, start at \$28, which is affordable, given that you could wear it for the next decade.

If you're looking for slightly more formal clothes, **Everlane** might be a good pick. It's another San Francisco-based startup that focuses on finding the best-quality materials in the world and using them to create affordable products. The brand's cotton T-shirts start at \$14 and its jeans start at \$68. If you're looking for higher-end materials, like silk and cashmere, Everlane also sells these at a fraction of the cost of other designer labels. But the goal here isn't just to provide good value: These clothes are designed to be classic and to last a long time. And on top of all of this, Everlane is known for its incredibly ethical and sustainable supply chain. Its factories, which are all over the world, have been carefully selected based on how workers are treated as well as how eco-friendly they are.



### **BUY FROM BRANDS THAT CONNECT YOU TO THE MAKER**

It's not always bad to buy products made in developing countries. Some brands have gone into poor communities around the world and built factory jobs to create employment opportunities. Take **Known Supply**, for instance. The brand creates soft cotton T-shirts, dresses, and trousers—that start at \$28—in Peru, Uganda, and India. Workers are paid a living wage, and the person who made the product signs their name on a tag, to create a real connection between the maker of the product and the buyer.

Another tip: Seek out brands that can verify they treat their workers well. Take shoes and accessories brand **Nisolo**, which employs 500 people in Peru, Mexico, and Kenya. The company's founders spend a lot of time in these factories, where they know workers by name. Not only do these artisans get paid significantly more than the national average, but Nisolo also provides important benefits, like healthcare, financial planning training, and English classes. And importantly, the company ensures that products are well-made, durable, and affordable. Leather sandals cost as little as \$118 and canvas totes start at \$78.



## BUY CLOTHES MADE FROM RECYCLED MATERIALS

Over the last few years, there has been a lot of innovation around polyester, a fabric widely used in moisture-wicking clothes. If you're in the market for a swimsuit or workout clothes, I would suggest looking at sustainable brands that use polyester made from recycled bottles pulled out of the ocean, rather than virgin polyester made from petroleum. [Summersalt](#) for instance, creates cute and high-performing swimsuits that cost \$95 a pop, all made from recycled fishnets and carpets. (Even its mail packaging is made from recycled plastic.) [Aday](#) creates athleisure clothes that can be worn at the gym and in the office using sustainably sourced polyester. Its [Waste Nothing Jacket](#), which costs \$145, uses 41 recycled bottles. [Rumi X](#) makes yoga outfits made from recycled materials of all kinds, including plastic bottles, coffee grounds, and crab shells. Its colorful leggings, which cost \$92, save 16 bottles from landfills.

Of course, when it comes to sustainability, it's never a simple story. The problem with polyester is that every time you wash it, tiny pieces of it—called microplastic—end up getting washed away and polluting the ocean. We are also consuming these micro plastics through the food we eat, and scientists still do not fully understand the impact of these materials on our bodies. (In fact, every meal you eat may have up to [100 piece of plastic](#) in it.)

The answer isn't necessarily to stop buying synthetic clothes; there are also problems with how many organic fabrics are sourced. Cotton, for instance, is a heavily water-intensive plant, and in many countries toxic pesticides are used in the growing process. All you can do is be aware of the impact of the materials you are using, and try to make the best decisions you can.



## BUY SHOES MADE FROM SUSTAINABLE BRANDS

When thinking about sustainable fashion, it's easy to forget shoes. Yet, as consumers, we're equally prone to overfilling our shoe closets. And the leather, rubber, foam, and plastic that go into our shoes is far from sustainable, and there isn't a good way to recycle any of it when we're done with the shoes. But the good news is that there are some innovative brands on the market now creating sustainable shoes using the most cutting-edge methods. At the moment, these shoe brands all focus on flats and sneakers.

**Allbirds** is a good place to start if you're looking for a comfortable, everyday sneaker or loafer. The brand is a certified B Corporation that uses sustainable materials in every part of the shoe. It first launched with a wool sneaker that took off with the Silicon Valley crowd but has gained fans all over the country, selling a million shoes in two years. It has also invented a summertime sneaker made of eucalyptus tree fibers. Every sneaker within the collection costs \$95.

If you're into more feminine shoes, **Rothy's** is a good pick for you. The brand makes flat shoes out of recycled bottles, and they come in several styles, from a pointy toe to a loafer to a ballerina flat. Women adore the brand because the shoes are comfortable, they come in a wide range of stylish designs, and they are machine washable. The shoes cost between \$125 and \$165.





## DON'T FORGET YOUR KID'S CLOTHES

Since kids grow out of their clothes so quickly—and also get them dirty—many parents tend to think of kids' clothes as even more disposable than their own. And since parents don't want to pay too much for their children's clothing, brands often make these clothes out of the cheapest possible materials, using the lowest-wage factories possible. Children's Place, for instance, manufactured clothes out of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh that was so poorly constructed that it collapsed in 2011, killing thousands and injuring thousands more.

There are a few small sustainable brands out there. [Blu & Blue](#), for instance, creates kids' denim clothes made in an Indian factory that is incredibly eco-friendly, using a fraction of the water that other denim brands use and that ensures that none of the indigo used in the manufacturing process pollutes the water. And unlike other kids' brands, Blu & Blue deliberately tries to create durable pieces that will withstand messes and that you can pass on to another child after yours has grown out of it. The pieces can be purchased in boutiques as well as Amazon, where leggings cost [\\$29.95](#) and rompers cost [\\$35.95](#).

[Monica + Andy](#) is known for creating cute clothes, the majority of which are made with organic cotton certified by GOTS (the Global Organic Textile Standard). This means that clothes are evaluated throughout the manufacturing process and do not use any pesticides, bleach, or heavy metals. And importantly, the factories must provide safe living conditions and fair wages for employees. Onesies start at [\\$22](#), shirts cost [\\$18](#), and dresses for older children cost [\\$38](#).

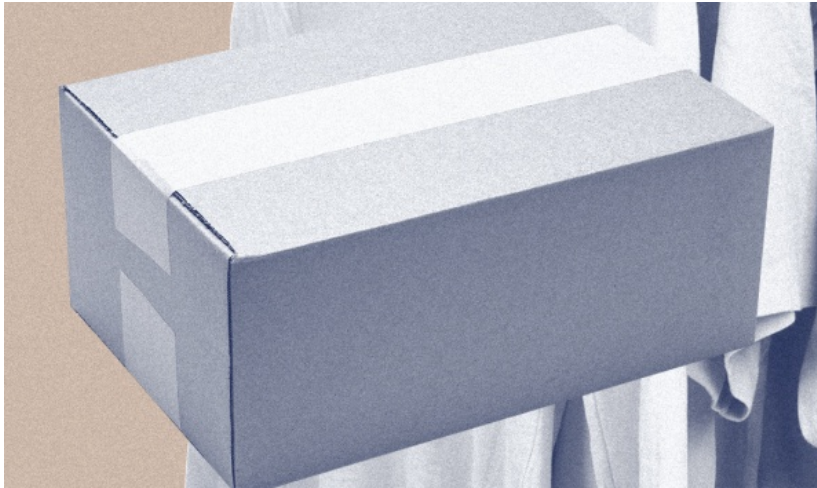


## CONSIDER BUYING SECONDHAND

Until recently, it took some skill to be fashionable while shopping for secondhand products. You'd have to take the time to sift through piles of clothes at Goodwill or the Salvation Army, or perhaps a consignment shop like Buffalo Exchange, then figure out how to put together an eclectic, bohemian, or vintage look. But not only is buying secondhand good value for money, it is great for the environment because it ensures that products circulate in the economy longer and stay out of landfills. This helps justify all the labour, raw materials, and energy that went into the manufacturing process.

The good news is that we now live in the golden age of secondhand shopping. Online retailers like [Thred Up](#) and [Poshmark](#) allow you to search for brands and products you like and buy them for a fraction of what you would pay for new items. If you're looking for kids' clothing, [Kidizen](#) offers a great selection of secondhand products for babies to teens. These stores also ensure that the items on their site are in good condition. If you love designer products, sites like the [Rebag](#), [The Real Real](#), and [Tradesy](#) sell high-end bags and shoes that have been inspected for authenticity. In fact, luxury products are among some of the best items to buy secondhand because they tend to be well made and stay in good shape through several users.

In most cases, the products you get from these sites will be in excellent condition. But if they arrive at your door with that infamous [thrift store smell](#), it's relatively easy to get rid of it. One cleaning expert recommends washing them in Dr. Bronner's, and then it's as good as new.



## TRY RENTING, RATHER THAN BUYING

A new trend in the fashion industry is clothing rental. Companies like [Rent the Runway](#) and [Caastle](#) are helping brands transform their stores into rental services. The idea is that you don't need to buy fast-fashion items that are in vogue, wear them a few times, then toss them out. You can rent these items, wear them a few times, then send them back where they will be mailed out to another fashionista. You wouldn't need to buy those millennial pink pedal pushers that you'd only wear three times; you could rent them. Brands like Gwynnie Bee, Ann Taylor, and Rent the Runway have all pioneered this approach.

On a large scale, if this model takes off, it will mean that the fashion industry will produce fewer goods, but consumers will still get to enjoy all the fun on-trend items they love. But there are some downsides to this approach, too. Mailing clothes back and forth isn't great for the environment. And these brands need to launder the clothes every time they come back, and even the most eco-friendly of dry-cleaning methods still has some environmental impact.

The most innovative and eco-friendly brand I have discovered within the rental economy is [For Days](#). The brand rents organic cotton T-shirts that are made in the most sustainable method possible for prices as low as \$12 a month for three shirts of different styles and colors. After you're done wearing your shirt, you can send it back, where [For Days](#) will recycle it into brand-new T-shirts, creating an entirely closed loop system. Eventually, For Days will expand into other products, opening up some intriguing possibilities about how we might dress more sustainably in the future. As an added bonus, customers are obsessed with the T-shirts themselves, claiming they are incredibly soft and comfortable to wear. And you never need to worry about staining your white shirts because you can send them back to be recycled and receive a new one in the mail.

As you can see from this list, there are many brands that are trying to make a difference in the fashion industry but also working hard to keep prices affordable. If you're keen to change your shopping habits and fill your closet with clothes that you can feel good about, this list is a good place to start. But it's also a good idea to use this as a starting point to explore the world of ethical fashion and learn how to figure out if a brand is thinking about workers and the earth in its manufacturing practices.

# Stop buying crap, and companies will stop making crap

It's hard to believe that our purchasing decisions have any impact on the fashion industry. But this week, we saw that they do.

On Tuesday, the first daughter announced that she was **shuttering** her fashion line. In an official statement, she explained that it was because she wanted to focus on her role as an adviser in her father's administration. But the timing of the announcement was curious: She could have ended her brand the day she took the White House position, but she chose not to.

The business seemed to be floundering: One source found that online sales of Ivanka Trump products sold on Amazon, Macy's, Bloomingdales, and Zappos fell nearly 55% over the last year.

It's hard to pinpoint what exactly caused sales to plummet, but if you refused to purchase an Ivanka Trump product over the last few years, I'm going to suggest that *you* had something to do with it.



There are many reasons you may have scrolled past those bland Ivanka Trump A-line dresses or bedazzled heels on Amazon or walked past them at Bloomingdales. The brand was the target of a massive boycott, spearheaded by Grab Your Wallet, a movement urging people to protest the Trump family's ethical violations by refusing to shop with retailers selling their brands. Reporters investigating the brand's supply chains found a trail

of **human-rights violations**—from below minimum wage pay to being forced to work 57 hours a week to hit production targets—which may have dissuaded some women from buying the clothes. And then there was the **crappy design** of the products: Women **complained** that they were made of low-quality materials and were unflattering on most body types.

It almost doesn't matter whether you were more offended by her father's child separation policies or how ugly her **cork pumps** were. The fact is, our individual purchasing choices do matter: We have the power to kill off brands and force the industry to do better.

It can be hard to believe our buying decisions matter when we consider the sheer enormity of the fashion industry. Fashion is a \$2.4 trillion global sector that hires 70 million people worldwide and is the second biggest polluter after the oil industry. And yes, we're drowning in clothes: Setting foot in an H&M or Old Navy means wading through racks of cheaply made stuff that will be replaced with new looks next week. How could a split-second decision to buy a T-shirt from one brand over another do anything to move the needle?

But as a fashion reporter, I'm seeing some big consumer-led trends that are sweeping the industry, thanks to our collective decision to effect change. We're telling brands to stop treating clothes like they are disposable, cut down on pollution, and treat their workers with more dignity—and they're listening.



## **WE'RE KILLING FAST FASHION**

Fast fashion may be on its last legs. Take it from H&M, which was forced to admit in its March financial report that it had \$4.3 billion of unsold inventory left hanging on its racks, along with a **massive drop in sales**. In fact, the Swedish company has started incinerating clothes in power plants to generate energy. When you consider all of the raw materials, chemical pollution, human labour, and transportation costs required to make just a single shirt, the scale of the waste is astounding. But the fact that we're not buying the goods that

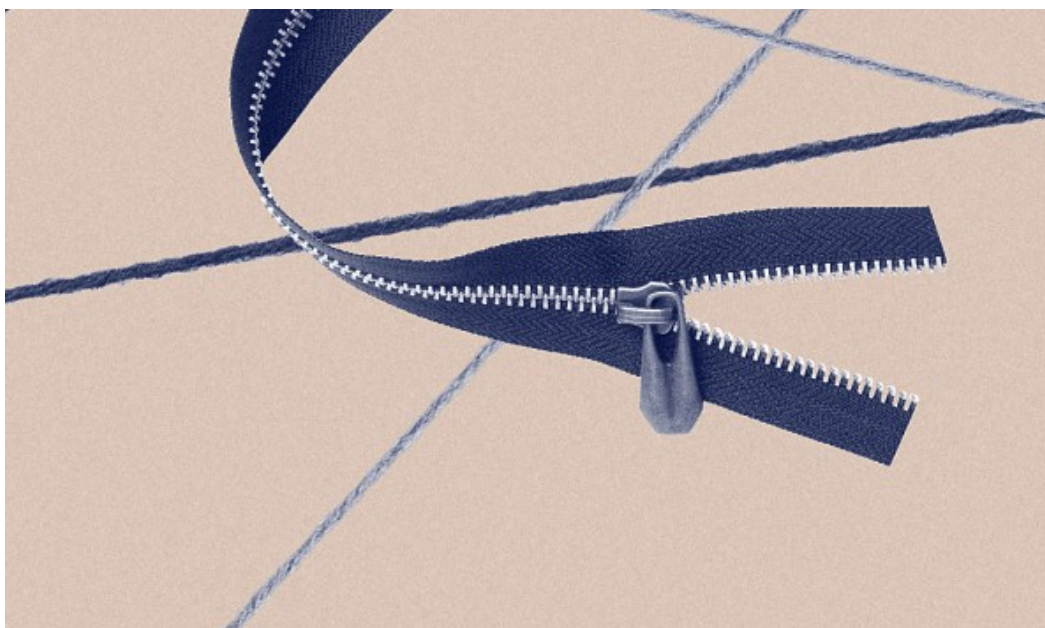
H&M is churning out also sends a powerful message to the company: We've lost our appetite for fast fashion, the category of clothes that H&M helped pioneer.

The original promise of fast fashion was that it would democratize great design. H&M, along with other retail giants like Zara, Forever21, and TopShop, would study the looks designers were showing at fashion week, then make similar styles at rock bottom prices. They did this by building a global supply chain—and tapping on low-wage labour—that could crank out designs faster than ever before. And the concept spread throughout the industry, forcing companies like Target and Walmart to keep up by supplying customers with similarly cheap and fashionable clothes.

But fast fashion also trained consumers to think of clothes as disposable. When you can buy an of-the-moment **dress for \$12.99**, it's very easy to come back in a week to pick up a new one and toss the old one. We now know that this behaviour has huge environmental consequences. As the media has widely reported, Americans have doubled the amount of clothing they throw away every year over the last two decades from **7 million to 14 million tons**, which is about 80 pounds a person. And donating clothes to charities only creates **economic headaches** in developing countries, some of which are trying to ban the import of secondhand clothes.

We're just not into it anymore. And it's not just H&M's revenues that are **plunging dramatically**. Zara's parent company Inditex is seeing **sluggish sales** this year, driving its shares to a three-year **low**, while Forever 21 reported a \$40 million loss at the **end of 2017**.

H&M appears to be getting the message. It's now tinkering with alternative concepts, like **ARKET**, a new brand that focuses on creating durable products using the highest quality materials on the market. ARKET is currently only available in Europe, where for the equivalent of **\$90** you can get a classic satin strap dress that you'll be able to wear every summer for years. It's a signal of how drastically H&M's thinking has changed, all because we're asking for better.



## WE'RE DEMANDING BRANDS TREAT WORKERS BETTER

It's not just quality and environmental waste we care about. Many consumers are more concerned than ever about how garment workers around the world are being treated.

Many of us had a big wakeup call in 2013, when a shoddily built clothing factory in Bangladesh **collapsed**, killing 1,138 garment workers and injuring 2,600 more. (The *New York Times* found that many of the injured are still suffering five years later, and a number of them have committed suicide.) After all, these low-wage labourers had lost their lives making clothes—for brands like The Children's Place, Mango, and Primark—that many buyers would casually throw away after a few wears.

In the past, most brands were cagey about sharing details about their supply chain. But things have changed over the last few years, largely because consumers are demanding to know if anybody suffered while making our clothes. Many fashion startups are carefully choosing to manufacture at factories where workers are treated well and are paid a living wage.

Some, like **American Giant** and **Reformation**, are building factories in the U.S., where there are stronger workplace regulations and companies can keep a closer eye on production. Others, like **Everlane** and **Known Supply**, search out the most ethical factories around the world and give their customers a glimpse into the workers' lives on their website. These brands are all growing quickly, which is forcing the rest of the industry to take notice and change their behaviour. H&M, for instance, now makes its list of **suppliers public**.

But as consumers, our work is far from over. While there is some **evidence** that the market for ethically conscious products is growing and young people, in particular, are keen to buy from brands that are doing good in the world, the biggest apparel corporations are often the slowest to change their ways, partly because they have so much power in the market and believe their customers will buy anything they put on their shelves.

Just this week, for instance, Walmart and H&M were accused of turning a blind eye to the **plight of workers** in South India, 100 of whom have died over the last year, many in suspected suicides. And then there was Ivanka Trump's brand. Workers at her **Indonesian** factory were paid so little, they had to live in boarding houses and couldn't afford the gas money to visit their children. Workers at her **Chinese** factory were paid below the national minimum wage, and worked 15 hour days with only two days off a month.

When we hear stories of widespread abuse at factories thousands of miles away, it's easy to fall into apathy and believe that there's not much we can do to change the status quo. But we can allow our horror and outrage to change our behaviour, and prompt us to think carefully about where we choose to buy our next pair of jeans or kitten heels. It might not change things immediately, but over time, it's clear that wallet activism works.

# Want to know if your clothes are ethically sourced? Theory's new labelling system is for you

**Theory** believes that sustainability is just one part of responsible sourcing. Its new fabrics consider workers' rights and animal welfare, too.

Bikinis made from recycled plastic. Sneakers made from bamboo. Jackets made from discarded outerwear. As consumers become increasingly aware of the devastating impact that fashion has on the environment, brands are racing to replace highly polluting materials with more eco-friendly ones.

While many fashion labels narrowly focus their sustainability efforts (and marketing of the same) on a single material or item, Theory has chosen to take a more complex approach. Its newest initiative, called **Theory For Good**, tackles three of the signature materials that Theory uses in its clothes—wool, cotton, and linen—and considers their environmental footprint, workers' rights, and animal welfare. It's an approach that's harder to communicate to customers, but one that Wendy Waugh, Theory's head of sustainability and raw materials, says is more impactful. "When you think of the sustainability of a single fiber, like wool, it has to do with everything from the land to the animal welfare to the energy usage in the factories," says Waugh. "The way I look at it, sustainability is about making every aspect of this better. And we're trying to chip away at all of it."





Over the past three years, Theory has gone deep into the recesses of its supply chain to find the most ethical suppliers for these signature materials. It is currently working with its partner mills to trace each fabric all the way back to its raw materials. Today, it unveils a new labeling system for its clothes. Products with tags that say Good Wool, Good Linen, and Good Cotton mean that the material in them is traceable all the way back to their origins. Currently, it's working towards increasing the number of clothes that can carry the tag, but by 2025, 100% of its signature fabrics will be traceable. Waugh explains that it is a very complex process for each supplier to identify the sources of each material, but Theory is nearly there. "We're chipping away at the problem," says Waugh.

For the time being, Theory is not tackling the issue of recycling or the afterlife of its clothes, which is something other brands are doing. (Brands like Patagonia and Eileen Fisher now collect used garments to repair them, and Levi's is beginning to [design collections](#) that will more easily recycle.) Recyclability is something that Theory hopes to take on further down the line. "We try to make incremental improvements with each season," Waugh says

Siddhartha Shukla, Theory's chief brand officer, explains that the brand was founded on material innovation, which all depends on thoughtful sourcing. The brand debuted nearly two decades ago when the founders found a mill that incorporated stretch into wool. They used this material in suits, making it more comfortable and less prone to wrinkling than traditional wool. Over the years, using so-called technical fabrics in suiting has become the norm, but Theory has tried to stay ahead of the pack by continuing to invest in high-quality wearable materials. "Sourcing the best materials is part of our DNA," Shukla says. "So this was the lens through which we considered sustainability."

[Image: courtesy Theory]

While it seems like it should be fairly easy to trace the origins of a fabric, it's actually a nearly impossible challenge. The fashion industry relies on a massive global supply chain, with many, many middlemen along the way. Raw materials such as cotton, wool, and cashmere are produced in countries around the world, then bundled together and sold on global commodities markets and auctions. Mills then buy these raw materials and turn them into fabrics. Then factories buy the fabrics and turn them into garments. Many brands are only familiar with the last few steps in this process, like the mills and the factories it works with. This means they have little insight into the environmental impact and treatment of workers and animals earlier in the process.



This is one reason that the fashion industry's impact on the planet and on human rights has gone unchecked for so long. Consumers, and even fashion brands, often have no idea about the **slavery** and **pollution** that went into clothes, which means they can't hold the industry into account. The truth is that many fashion labels have no idea what their **carbon footprint** is or how many chemicals went into cultivating a particular plant since they can't trace their products all the way through the supply chain.



Waugh explains that Theory partnered with its suppliers as it undertook this process. Theory has asked each of its factories and mills to provide documentation about the source of its raw materials, and in many cases, Waugh and her team actually visit the farms where the raw wool, cotton, and linen come from. She says it's much easier for a large company to make such demands because it has some market power. "We're a very large consumer of wool," says Waugh. "This gives us the leverage to ask suppliers to do the work of looking into their sourcing. But we think this is good for the industry as a whole, since its raising the bar when it comes to traceability."

Throughout the process, Waugh and her team weigh the various ethical considerations. When it comes to its Good Wool, for instance, it works with sheep farms in Tasmania and South America that can prove that their animals are well provided for and free from discomfort and harm. The wool is then shipped to the Tollegno 1900 mill in Italy, which uses solar panels and water turbines powered by the river that runs along its walls. The water used in the dyeing and finishing of the wool is purified and returned to its source, and on top of that, 40% of the water is reused, to reduce the mill's overall consumption.

Theory's Good Cotton and Good Linen labels designate similar practices and precautions, and Waugh says they're still striving to do better. "We consider Theory For Good to be a work in progress," says Waugh. "We're continuing to work to improve the sustainability of every material we use."

Theory's approach to sustainability is wide-reaching and continually improving, but the downside is that it can be hard to explain it to customers. After all, it's pretty straightforward to explain that a jacket was made with 20 water bottles or that a sneaker is carbon-neutral; it's another matter to explain that wool is traceable and ethically sourced. That's why the labeling system is so useful. "We've created this system to signal to our customers that this particular material is ethically sourced," Shukla says. "Soon, this will be true of every fabric we sell."