Consumers don't believe Fashion Industry's Ethical Claims

Contributed by TNS
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- 45% of consumers sceptical about ethical practices

- 28.4 million consumers cite ethics as an important factor in their fashion choices

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August 17 2007, London, UK. Nearly half (45%) of Britainâ€™s consumers do not believe the claims made by high street fashion stores about their ethical credentials, according to the latest findings from TNS Worldpanel Fashion.

Despite this scepticism towards retailers, TNS saw a significant rise in the number of shoppers appreciating the importance of ethical production in its annual ethical clothes report â€“ some 28.4 million consumers felt ethics were an important factor in their choice of clothing and footwear, equivalent to 59% of the population.

Young consumers tend to be less cynical about retailerâ€™s ethical claims, with only 34% doubting the legitimacy of ethical practices. However, under 25â€™s are also the least likely to buy ethical fashion; whilst a significant 54% claim itâ€™s important to them in theory, 6 in 10 admit they buy the clothes they want without caring how they are produced. Consumers aged over 55 are the most likely to consider ethical issues before purchasing, as well as being the most sceptical about claimed ethics, some 34% of older consumers will look at the country of origin before buying clothes.

Ethical issues are more critical to women than men: 63% of women say itâ€™s an important consideration compared to 54% of men. In addition, women are more likely to be attracted to stores that promote ethical clothing and 32% of women say there are clothing brands or retailers they would never buy for ethical reasons.

Consumers believe the most significant factor for an item to be considered â€˜ethicalâ€™ is that no sweatshops or child labour were involved in the production, with 70% of consumers saying this was very important. â€˜A fair price paid to the producerâ€™ and â€˜no environmental damage causedâ€™ were the second and third most important factors respectively. Shoppers rate the use of organic materials to be the least important factor in ethical wear, with just 15% of consumers saying this was very important.

Criteria for a product to be â€˜ethicalâ€™Â Â Â -Â Â Â Â % saying â€˜very importantâ€™
No sweat shops/child labourÂ 70%
Fair price to producersÂ 55%
No damage to environmentÂ 45%
Producing community directly benefitsÂ Â Â Â Â 42%
Percentage of profits given to charityÂ Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â 25%
Political situation in producing countryÂ Â Â Â Â Â 24%
Uses organic fabricÂ 15%

Elaine Giles, research executive, TNS Worldpanel Fashion, said: â€œWith the recent bad publicity surrounding the factory conditions employed by some of the UKâ€™s leading clothing retailers, ethical fashion is high on the consumer agenda. Over the past few years we have watched consumers flock to the cheapest outlets on the high street, but increasing awareness of the potential cost to humanity for these bargains is hitting home. Some 7.1 million consumers say ethical issues are important to them but feel availability of such items is poor. This creates a great potential market for the clothes industryâ€•.

Whilst the terms fair trade and organic have been closely linked to the food we eat for many years, they are only just breaking into the fashion arena with retailers slowly increasing their ranges. Elaine Giles offers a final word of warning to retailers who ignore the pace of this trend: â€œRetailers must not underestimate the importance of ethical credentials and really need to understand what is important to their customers - many retailers are producing organic cotton ranges marketed at younger consumers, when the young actually consider organic to be the least important ethical criteria. The focus needs to be more on production and sourcing methods rather than the materials used.â€•