

Green and Fashion

**Remarks of Stephen D'Esposito
President
RESOLVE**

**“Green: Sustainability, Significance, and Style –
A Conference in New York**

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Intro—Birkenstocks and Making “Green Stick”

When I told my staff that I was speaking at this conference they were more worried about what I was going to wear than what I was going to say.

I know that I was asked to help fashion and design think about “green,” but it can also be argued, given the caricature of “green” (you know: Birkenstock wearing, shaggy, unkempt...) that “green” needs fashion as much as fashion needs “green.”

Of course it’s as easy to caricature the world of fashion as to caricature “green.” The caricature goes something like this: “fashion is about excess and extravagance, its ephemeral; it’s about unnecessary, non-essential consumption, even conspicuous consumption.”

What I would like to explore with you today is the importance of getting beyond these caricatures and getting to something more essential and enduring, and working together to ensure

that “green” and “green fashion and design” are more than simply a trend—that they are both here to stay, that they “stick.”

Green, Beyond a Fashion Trend

I do worry about “green” as a fashion trend. We only have to look at today’s headlines to understand the challenge. This morning the New York Times reported 500,000 jobs lost last month. Does “green” matter in this economic climate? Is going “green” or becoming “sustainable” central to the future economic success of your business? Do we sacrifice the environment for growth, again, or is “green” a new economic driver—green energy, green transportation, green fashion?

Many of us experienced the last period when “green” was fashionable—the late 80’s. We had “green” celebrity endorsements, “green” themed videos on MTV and VH1 (back when MTV and VH1 were relatively new to the scene) and skyrocketing green group membership. Then we had war and a recession and then a return to economic growth--soon everyone was driving SUVs. “Green” wasn’t really part of the equation and despite the reality of climate change, it didn’t register as an issue. So, yes, I do worry about “green” as just a fashion trend.

Fashion—“Green” Target or “Green” Opportunity?

From sweatshops to child labor, blood diamonds to dirty gold; human rights, poverty and environmental campaigners who are trained to analyze sectors, markets and companies and look for vulnerabilities, weaknesses and soft spots, and opportunities, are focused on your sector.

Why is the fashion sector such a tempting target? Because the sector is ripe with vulnerabilities, and these vulnerabilities create opportunities and leverage for

advocates. Consider the following five characteristics of your sector:

- Your sector has a very public interface. It can be touched, seen, viewed and visited. You are not operating in the background or in remote locations.
- The greater the success of your brand, design, label or product, the greater your vulnerability and the higher the expectations. Face it; the first stop for a campaign is a brand like Tiffany or Cartier or a product like the iPod or iPhone.
- Your product chain-of-custody is typically complex, hard to penetrate, and sometimes linked to serious negative impacts on people and the environment. Many of you don't know the original source of the materials you are buying and what it really took to make it.
- For years the movement to label and certify more essential products like wood, food, fish and paper has been growing, was it realistic to think this wouldn't extend to fashion?
- There is a temptation to over-state claims. False or unsubstantiated claims are one of your greatest enemies and self-branding and self-certifying has limits. One high profile expose' of a sham fair trade or "green" product will undo millions of dollars and years worth of real, positive work. The whole sector could be tarnished.

In sector after sector "green" is becoming embedded in business systems, so consumer and business differentiation is now increasingly real. We've got fair trade coffee and bananas and wood and fish certified from sustainable sources. If we can do it for coffee, we can do it for fashion.

The Hope of Fashion—5 Opportunities

To succeed, any enterprise (whether a business or a human rights or environmental campaign) needs hope and leadership. And we all need to be able to demonstrate that success is achievable.

When I was at EARTHWORKS, where we launched the “No Dirty Gold” campaign, the research we undertook showed that environmental donors and sympathetic jewelry consumers would rally to our call for responsibly sourced jewelry if we could show that we had at least a few business leaders on our side. They wanted campaign leadership but they also wanted and expected leadership from business.

Today the fashion and design sector is ripe with opportunity for “green” leadership. You may be aware of other opportunities, but consider the following:

1. Fashion Products as Personal Identity

As you know, your products are defined by the fact that they help people brand themselves, project who they are, and establish an identity. What we wear matters to us. Adornment can be a form self-expression or even free speech. Free speech advocates in repressive countries sometimes send signals through what they wear. Your industry has the potential to help people establish and project their “green” identity.” This is a potentially rich vein for the fashion sector.

2. Adding New Values

Many of your products are used as part of a positive values-based or emotional transaction. They’re about love, friendship, commitment, romance, identify, self-expression and self worth. It is easy to see how values like protecting the planet, communities and human rights could be additive values—and we already see

numerous examples of this in the marketplace. The products you produce can be part of a movement towards good, ethical consumption.

3. Creativity

Your sector is creative and entrepreneurial; these attributes can be put to good use as a business and social proposition. Creative leaders in the fashion and advertising sectors should be partnering with environmental and social leaders on joint campaigns like the “red” campaign or the call from Tiffany & Co. to protect coral reefs. We should be innovating and testing new creative, collaborative models. By the way, speaking of missed opportunities, why are other jewelers not taking a proactive position on protecting coral? Are you waiting for something like a consumer campaign?

4. The Supply Chain as an Ally

In your position near the end of the supply chain, you are in a sense vulnerable to consumer pressure but you are also in a position to ask the right questions and make demands of those in your supply chain. Consider that companies as different as Wal-Mart and Columbia Gemhouse and others have already begun to ask, and get answers to, these questions from their suppliers.

5. Fashion as Permanent, Lasting, Enduring

Fashion and design can and should be lasting and enduring and this value or attribute is inherently “green.” Whether it’s a wedding band from Tiffany or Cartier, a watch that gets passed on from generation-to-generation, the fashionable carry-bags that we now use for groceries or other purchases (rather than disposable paper or plastic), or classic design and

quality products meant to last from generation to generation, fashion and design is “green” when it is lasting and enduring. The architect Bill McDonough has called for designers to think “cradle-to-cradle.”

Strategic Options and Corporate Personality Types

As you consider your strategy or approach going forward it may be useful to take stock of what is happening in the sector today, the strategies being pursued by other companies, and your organizational personality, positioning and posture. Today, as I look across the fashion, jewelry and design sectors, I see companies, at least those who are trying to respond to these issues, utilizing three different strategies:

- **The Ethical or Conscious Company**

For the conscious company, ethics, sustainability or a “green” orientation permeates the company or brand—typically along with other values or attributes. “Green” is not held up as a unique selling point, it is embedded in products with multiple values. These companies operate with the premise that their customers simply expect this orientation and to do otherwise would create risk. This is the approach of a company like Tiffany or Cartier; and this strategy is often utilized by established companies.

- **The Tinkering Company**

While the whole company may not go fully “green” at the outset the company may test a “green” product, product line or strategy. This allows the company to test the ethical or “green” proposition without immediately transforming the entire company. This is the model of Toyota with the Prius or the “Red” line of clothing. It is also the model recently used by Wal-Mart for jewelry. This approach seems to suit larger companies.

- **The Company = “Green”**

Then there are companies seeking to build an entirely ethical, sustainable or “green” proposition from the start—or those seeking to re-launch themselves as a fully ethical brand. These companies use this as a primary selling point and as a way to differentiate themselves—they wear their ethics on their sleeves. Some of these companies see themselves as equal to campaigners or activist as change-makers or innovators. The classic example of this is the Body Shop but we see numerous examples in the fashion sector today.

We can also see three personality types or organizational postures in the sector today:

- **The Initiators and Trend Setters**

These are the companies that self-initiate, take risks, and lead the pack. They don’t wait for others to act and they typically don’t wait to be asked. Sometimes these companies are out in front of the campaigners or social advocates.

- **The Networkers and Coalition Builders**

These are companies that will take positive steps but only if others join them. Some, such as smaller companies, want to forge partnerships or need to forge partnerships. Others want to talk and test and ensure that others are on board because they see value in solutions built through collaboration and testing. Some just want the comfort of knowing they have allies.

- **The Trailers**

These are companies that will only move after others have. They will not initiate. They will act but only once others have forged a path. They will seek to manage and limit risk. They will frustrate those who have led, but their movement is a sign that the sector has reached a tipping point.

A Call for Solutions, Innovation and Collaborative Leadership

Campaigners, advocates and activists cannot succeed without collaborative leaders in the corporate sector; and I believe the reverse is also true. Business leaders need partners in the social sectors.

In 2003, the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford called for “dissolving boundaries and brokering a dialogue between the public, private and nonprofit sectors” in order to foster social innovation. The bottom line is this: we will not resolve pressing environmental and social challenges without quick movement to collaborative solutions. So let’s get on with the task of dissolving boundaries.

I would like to close today with an offer to you to use RESOLVE as an agent for dissolving boundaries and building solutions.

RESOLVE can help you develop a strategy for engagement, we can help you work through tough issues, and we can support you when you need to negotiate with stakeholders. So ask us if you need help.

We also extend an offer to you to join with other civil society and business leaders in our new collaborative laboratory—dedicated to finding sustainable solutions that work for people, communities and business. We will help you to

create, develop, incubate and test new approaches, strategies, standards, technologies, systems or products.

The entry fee to participate is simply an idea, and will.

Thank you.