W4TEX: Strengthening Women's Representation in Senior Textile Positions

PROJECT NUMBER: 2023-1-SE01-KA220-ADU-000154918

Duration of the project: 01-11-2023 - 30-04-2026

UNIT 8 – TARGETING CUSTOMERS

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Date: March 2025

Version 2.0

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INTRODUCTION TO CONSUMER ACTION

The textile industry stands at a crossroads. Over the past few decades, it has been one of the largest contributors to global environmental degradation, driven by the demands of fast fashion, resource-intensive production, and the ever-growing consumption cycle. Yet, there is a growing recognition that the future of fashion lies in sustainability. Consumers are more environmentally conscious than ever before, pushing for changes in how clothes are made, sold, and consumed. In this context, women managers in the textile sector play a crucial role in leading the charge towards a greener, more sustainable industry. Their ability to influence consumer behaviour, implement green technologies, and promote sustainable practices is pivotal in transforming the sector for the better.

As a starting point, it's important to understand the profound impact that consumer behaviour has on the success or failure of sustainability initiatives in the fashion industry. Today's consumers, particularly younger generations like Millennials and Gen Z, are increasingly aware of the environmental and social implications of their purchasing decisions. This growing awareness presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the textile industry. While consumer demand for sustainable products is on the rise, barriers such as cost concerns, convenience, and misinformation about greenwashing still hinder the widespread adoption of eco-friendly choices.

Consumer education is thus a central theme. One of the most effective ways to encourage sustainable behaviour is through clear and transparent communication. Educating consumers about the benefits of green technologies, the environmental impact of their purchases, and the importance of supporting sustainable practices can help shift perceptions and behaviour. Whether through eco-labelling, targeted marketing campaigns, or direct engagement with consumers via social media, managers can lead the way in shaping a more sustainable future for the fashion industry.

A key element of this course is exploring the various ways in which textile companies can adopt green technologies to align their production processes with sustainability goals. In this unit, we will see how these technologies not only help reduce the carbon footprint of production but also empower consumers to make choices that contribute to environmental preservation. Key circular strategies, such as Slow Fashion, PaaS models, and repair initiatives, will be explored in detail. Slow Fashion advocates for a shift away from the fast-paced, disposable culture of fast fashion and promotes the production and consumption of higher-quality, timeless pieces designed to last longer. Meanwhile, PaaS models, such as clothing rental or leasing, allow consumers to access garments without the need for ownership, thus reducing overall consumption and encouraging garment reuse. Repair services further extend the life of clothing by offering consumers the opportunity to mend or customise garments instead of discarding them. Take-back schemes allow customers to bring in old clothes in exchange for discounts.

Managers in the textile industry have an important role to play in making these circular models accessible and appealing to consumers. This unit will explore how companies can incorporate Slow Fashion principles into their business models, create product-as-a-service offerings, and set up repair systems that incentivise consumers to engage in more sustainable behaviours. These approaches not only benefit the environment but also open up new revenue streams, engage consumers in long-term relationships, and enhance brand loyalty.

In this unit, we will explore practical ways to integrate sustainability into textile business practices while creating solutions that meet consumer demand for environmentally responsible products. By understanding and acting on consumer behaviour, embracing innovative green technologies, and implementing circular strategies like Slow Fashion, PaaS, and repair services, managers will be well-positioned to drive their companies and the industry as a whole toward a greener, more sustainable future.

GREEN STRATEGIES TARGETING CONSUMERS

Customer education

Understanding consumer motivations for sustainability

In unit 4, we explored consumers' motivation and the detrimental effects of fast fashion. Consumers' motivations for choosing sustainable products are varied but can be largely attributed to a desire for social responsibility, personal ethics, and environmental concerns. More than ever, people are beginning to recognise the significant environmental and social costs of the fast fashion industry. For instance, textile production is one of the largest sources of pollution globally, contributing to carbon emissions, excessive water use, and hazardous waste. These concerns are driving consumers to make more informed decisions when purchasing fashion items.

A significant number of consumers are increasingly motivated by environmental sustainability, ethical labour practices, and the desire to support brands that align with their values. According to recent studies, a growing percentage of consumers—especially among Gen Z and Millennials—are willing to pay a premium for sustainable products, with environmental impact and social responsibility being key factors influencing purchasing decisions (Manley, 2023; FashionFinest, 2024). In Spain, 61% of consumers would be ready to change their way of consuming to reduce their environmental footprint (thereasonbehind, 2022). This shift in consumer behaviour must encourage fashion brands to adopt eco-friendly materials, fair-trade labour practices, and more sustainable production processes.

Drivers of change

Consumer Advocacy

Customer Advocacy refers to a marketing strategy focused on mobilising existing customers to become enthusiastic advocates for a brand, product or service. It has become a powerful force in pushing the fashion industry toward sustainability. Campaigns like "Who made my clothes", launched in 2013 after the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh (where over 1000 workers died, mostly women) by Fashion Revolution significantly influenced consumer awareness and behaviour. This NGO advocates for greater transparency and ethical practices in the fashion industry, demanding that companies disclose their supply chains and improve working conditions for garment workers.

Another example is the #30wearschallenge, launched by the Italian creative director Livia Firth, which is about wearing every piece of clothing you buy at least 30 times. This campaign promotes more thoughtful consumption.

At the brand level, another example is Ecoalf, and the #BecauseThereIsNoPlanetB campaign. Through it, they help remove plastic debris from the oceans and rework it into yarn to make fashion products.

These movements have sparked a shift in how consumers view their relationship with fashion and are driving demand for more sustainable alternatives.

Consumer advocacy groups often use social media as a platform to spread awareness and pressure brands to adopt more sustainable practices. The growing influence of these movements highlights the importance of consumer power in shaping industry practices and driving change.

Social media influence

While it is true that social media influences unsustainable behaviours, the role of social media in promoting sustainable fashion cannot be underestimated. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become key channels for promoting sustainable fashion and driving consumer engagement. Influencers, eco-conscious celebrities, and activists use these platforms to advocate for sustainable fashion choices, share tips on how to shop sustainably, and promote eco-friendly brands.

Influencers, in particular, hold significant sway over consumer behaviour. Social media influencers have the power to shape consumer preferences by showcasing brands, products, and lifestyles that align with sustainability values (Vilkaitė-Vaitonė, 2024). Influencers can serve as a bridge between brands and consumers, educating their followers about the importance of sustainability and encouraging them to adopt more eco-conscious habits.

Educating consumers by delivering product information

Effective communication is key to educating consumers about the benefits of green technologies. Brands can use storytelling to create emotional connections with consumers by sharing the journeys of their sustainable products, such as the sourcing of materials or the impact of their production processes on the environment. Hosting workshops, in-store events, and webinars can also provide opportunities for consumers to learn about sustainable fashion practices and how to incorporate them into their lives, including topics like upcycling, repair techniques, and how to shop sustainably.

By showcasing sustainable materials and technologies, such as organic cotton, recycled fibres, or water-saving production techniques, fashion brands can help consumers understand the tangible benefits of their choices. These efforts can drive a more sustainable consumer culture by reinforcing the importance of making environmentally responsible decisions.

Nudging consumers toward sustainability

One effective strategy to influence consumer behaviour is nudging. The concept of nudging involves using subtle cues to encourage consumers to make sustainable choices without limiting their freedom to choose. In the context of fashion, nudges can include placing eco-friendly products in more prominent positions in stores or online, highlighting the environmental benefits of products through labels or descriptions, or offering small incentives for sustainable purchases.

Incentives for green consumption

Incentives play a crucial role in encouraging consumers to adopt sustainable practices. Fashion brands can implement loyalty programs or rewards for customers who make sustainable purchases. For example, a brand might offer discounts, points, or special rewards for customers who buy eco-friendly products or recycle old clothing. Additionally, promoting second-hand shopping and rental services, like Ecodicta, in Spain, a service working with over 78 brands, can incentivise consumers to participate in the circular economy and reduce their environmental footprint.

Specific actions to overcome consumer barriers

However, barriers such as cost, convenience, and misinformation about greenwashing continue to influence purchasing behaviour. For many consumers, the price of sustainable fashion can be a significant deterrent, especially when sustainable alternatives are perceived to be more expensive than fast fashion options. Additionally, the convenience of purchasing low-cost, trendy garments from fast fashion retailers creates friction for those who want to support sustainable fashion but struggle with the perceived lack of accessibility or affordability, reason for which we assist to a cognitive dissonance (see unit 4).

Addressing Cost Concerns

One of the primary challenges to green consumerism is the perceived higher cost of sustainable fashion. However, sustainable products are often seen as long-term investments. For instance, higher-quality garments that are made from eco-friendly materials tend to last longer than fast fashion items, which often wear out quickly. Brands can promote the value of longevity in their products, emphasizing how investing in a sustainable garment can save money over time.

To make sustainable products more accessible, fashion companies can explore cost-reducing strategies, such as producing garments in larger quantities, partnering with eco-friendly suppliers, and improving manufacturing efficiency. This can help reduce prices while still maintaining sustainable production practices.

Convenience and availability

Consumers often face difficulties when trying to find sustainable fashion that is both convenient and accessible. Fashion brands can address this issue by making sustainable products readily available both online and in physical stores. Simplifying the purchasing process and ensuring that eco-friendly products are easy to locate can help increase consumer adoption of sustainable practices.

Moreover, improving logistics and supply chain management can help make sustainable products more widely available and reduce the carbon footprint associated with production and transportation.

Greenwashing

Another barrier is the greenwashing, where companies falsely claim to be sustainable or eco-friendly. This can undermine genuine sustainability efforts. Consumers may feel confused or misled by vague sustainability claims, making it difficult for them to trust the information provided by brands. This highlights the importance of clear communication, transparency, and third-party certifications to combat greenwashing and help consumers make more informed decisions.

To overcome greenwashing, brands must demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability through transparency and third-party certifications. By working with trusted organizations and adhering to established environmental standards, brands can earn consumers' trust and differentiate themselves from companies that make false sustainability claims.

Information to the customer: product transparency and labelling

There is a clear trend in consumer behaviour favouring sustainable and ethical fashion. This includes a strong demand for organic, recycled, and upcycled materials, as well as interest in brands that are transparent about their production processes. Thus, one crucial element in driving the sustainable transformation targeting consumers is product transparency—empowering consumers with clear, reliable information about the sustainability of their purchases. Transparency encompasses all the information related to the production, environmental impact, and maintenance of textile products. Providing such information can promote accountability, as it allows consumers to verify the claims made by brands and better understand the environmental, social, and economic consequences of their purchasing choices. This transparency can take various forms, from certifications and eco-labels to digital passports and transparency reports. We will now explore the significance of these tools in promoting sustainable purchasing behaviours and outline the technical innovations that can facilitate their implementation.

Eco-labelling and Certification

One of the most straightforward ways to promote transparency is through the use of recognised certifications and eco-labels. These labels serve as indicators that a product has met specific environmental and ethical standards. In Europe, research registered about 55 ecolabels in the textile industry, with focuses on toxins, chemicals, natural resources, material use, energy use, waste, water quality, use and waste, recycling, soil, biodiversity and GHG Emissions (Ranasinghe, 2021). For example:

- EU Ecolabel: for textile products such as clothing and accessories. This label guarantees a more sustainable fibre production, a less polluting production process, strict restrictions on the use of hazardous substances and a long-lasting final product. (EU Ecolabel -clothing and textiles, n.d.)

- Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS): This certification is widely recognised in the textile industry and applies to textiles made from at least 70% organic

fibres. It guarantees that the product has been produced in an environmentally and socially responsible manner, with strict regulations on chemical use, water management, and labour practices (global-standard, n.d.).

- OEKO-TEX Standard 100: Products bearing this label have undergone testing for harmful substances, ensuring they are safe for human use. This standard helps address concerns over the safety and toxicity of chemicals used in textile production (oeko-tex, n.d.)

- Fair Trade Certification: This certification ensures that workers in the textile supply chain receive fair wages and work under safe conditions. It also ensures that the production processes meet high environmental and social standards (fairtrade, n.d.)

Using eco-labels, green certifications, and transparency in marketing materials can help brands provide clear information to consumers about the environmental impact of their products. Providing this information allows consumers to make more informed decisions and encourages them to prioritise sustainability when shopping for clothes.

Sustainability reports

Beyond certifications, large-size companies are now asked to provide reports which outline detailed information about their supply chains, sourcing practices, and environmental impact. The CSRD European regulation mandates detailed and standardised reporting on sustainability matters, which must be externally verified. The reports are expected to cover the entire value chain, with information on the company's environmental impact, supply chain practices, and social responsibility initiatives.

One of the central aims of the CSRD is to enhance transparency and provide more reliable data for investors, consumers, and other stakeholders in order to drive more sustainable practices across industries.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may have fewer resources and less complex structures than large companies, but they are still being encouraged to engage in sustainability reporting. While SMEs are not directly impacted by the CSRD unless they meet specific criteria (e.g., being listed on the stock market), they are encouraged to provide voluntary sustainability reports: this is the voluntary reporting standard for SMEs (VSME). The EU recognizes that SMEs play a crucial role in driving the European economy and aims to create a supportive environment for these businesses to embrace transparency.

Other voluntary reporting initiatives can be developed using tools such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or by referring to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These frameworks help SMEs disclose their sustainability efforts without overwhelming them with complex regulations.

Packaging and information on labels

Another essential aspect of product transparency is the information provided on packaging. Packaging can be considered an educational tool: textile companies are increasingly using their packaging for communicating sustainability information.

Packaging can display information about the product's origin, such as where the raw materials were sourced and where the manufacturing took place. This provides consumers with insight into the social and environmental footprint of the product.

It is also a support to print sustainability tips, facts about the environmental benefits of the product's materials or eco-friendly care instructions, ensuring that consumers know how to extend the life of their garments. This contributes to educating consumers on how to care for their clothing to extend its lifespan, including washing tips and proper storage and repair techniques, and promotes product longevity by reducing the frequency of replacement.

In addition, care should be given to the packaging itself: sustainable packaging has become an integral part of the circular economy, and many companies are moving toward biodegradable or recyclable materials to reduce waste. As an example, Patagonia is using 100% recycled boxes and biodegradable packaging tape for their online orders.

Digital Product Passport

One of the most exciting innovations in product transparency is the development of digital passports. These are digital records that track the entire life cycle of a product—from raw material sourcing to production, use, and end-of-life disposal. Digital passports can contain all relevant data about a product's sustainability, certifications, and even consumer reviews.

The digital passport can be embedded into a product's QR code, which consumers can scan to access a wealth of information about the garment or textile product. This innovation empowers consumers to verify the sustainability claims made by companies, providing more detailed insight into the supply chain and environmental practices than traditional labels.

One example of DPP usage is Monobi, an Italian brand that has developed a full tracking system for all its garments, that can be scanned to access full information on traceability including raw materials, spinning, weaving and knitting, dyeing and finishing, modelling, and manufacturing.

It is to be noted that such a Digital Product Passport has been integrated at EU level in the Ecodesign for Sustainable Product Regulation (EC, 2024), which addresses, among other things, the textile sector and will impact the sustainable practices of the companies in the coming years.

Circular strategies to promote customers' sustainable behaviours

In addition to increased requests for information and transparency, consumer demand for sustainable fashion compels companies to rethink their business models. The fashion industry is increasingly prioritising sustainability in response to consumer preferences, which leads to the adoption of green and circular fashion consumption models. As consumers continue to demand ethical, sustainable, and transparent practices, brands are responding with not only efforts in sustainable materials, processing and transport but also by offering new services for consumers, such as repair services and supporting second-hand and rental clothing options. This shift is creating a new paradigm in fashion, one where sustainability is becoming integral to the brand's value proposition.

Slow fashion

Slow fashion emphasises designing, producing, and consuming garments with longevity in mind. It stands in stark contrast to the traditional fast fashion model, which is driven by the quick turnaround of cheap, disposable items meant for short-term use. Slow fashion encourages consumers to invest in quality pieces that are timeless, durable, and made with ethical practices. The principles of slow fashion include a focus on craftsmanship, reduced environmental impact, and fair labour practices.

For SMEs, slow fashion is not just a niche but a compelling way to build brand identity and foster deeper customer loyalty. By promoting longevity, these brands position themselves as ethical alternatives to the mass production of disposable fashion. The shift toward slow fashion involves focusing on the quality of materials, the ethical treatment of workers, and the use of sustainable processes. This mindset encourages consumers to purchase fewer but better pieces, fostering a more mindful and sustainable consumption cycle.

Product care

Educating consumers on how to care for their garments to extend their lifespan is an essential component of the slow fashion movement. Brands like [Patagonia](#) offer resources, tips, and products aimed at helping customers care for their clothes. This can include guidance on washing, repairing, and storing garments properly. This reduces the need to purchase new items and ultimately lowers the environmental impact of fashion.

Product-as-a-Service (PaaS) Models

Product-as-a-service (PaaS) refers to models where customers access products for a specific period of time (through rental, leasing, or subscription services) rather than owning them outright. This business model is particularly relevant in the fashion industry as it allows consumers to enjoy a broader variety of garments without the need for long-term ownership, thus reducing waste and overproduction.

Rental

Platforms like [Drexcode](#) allow customers to rent clothing for a period of time, instead of purchasing new garments. This model enables consumers to wear high-quality clothing for special occasions or daily use without committing to long-term ownership. By renting clothes, customers get access to new styles at a fraction of the cost while contributing to a reduction in textile waste and overproduction, encouraging a more sustainable, circular use of garments.

Subscription

The Danish baby clothes brand [Vigga](#) allows customers to receive a curated selection of clothing to rent. As the child grows, items are replaced with new packages, and the period of renting will be adapted to the age of the kid to adapt the specific needs of each customer. The clothing is returned at the end of the subscription cycle, reducing the need for new purchases. Subscription models encourage consumers to use garments temporarily, allowing for more sustainable consumption by reusing and circulating clothing instead of accumulating a wardrobe full of rarely worn items.

PaaS models in fashion help extend the lifecycle of clothing and promote a circular economy by facilitating the reuse and rental of garments. This system significantly reduces the demand for new production, which in turn lowers the environmental impact of textile manufacturing. PaaS also helps combat the "fast fashion" model by offering consumers access to high-quality, often designer garments that they might not otherwise purchase.

For managers looking to implement PaaS models in their textile business, it is essential to establish a reliable supply chain, ensure the proper maintenance and cleaning of garments, and foster customer engagement. Building an efficient logistics system is key to offering PaaS, as garments need to be returned, cleaned, and redistributed efficiently. It's also important to communicate the benefits of renting over owning to consumers and offer flexible, easy-to-use platforms for booking and payment.

Repair, upcycling, recycling

Repair

Repairing garments rather than discarding them is a crucial component of sustainability in fashion. Repair services allow consumers to extend the life of their clothing, thereby reducing textile waste. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift toward embracing repair over replacement. Consumers are increasingly interested in learning how to repair their clothing, and some brands are making it easier by offering repair kits or in-store repair services. SMEs are at the forefront of this trend, offering personalised services that encourage customers to hold onto their garments for longer.

Repair programmes can have different formats, such as:

- Introducing in-house repair services in the textile company (dedicated space for repairs)
- Offering repair kits for consumers (creating kits tailored to common garment issues like fixing small tears, repairing buttons, and reattaching zippers) The kit can be offered with the product, sold as a stand-alone product in-store, or sold as a service.
- Offering customisation and repair workshops
- Partnering with local repair shops

Upcycling and recycling

Upcycling is another crucial element of the circular economy in fashion. Upcycling for a textile product refers to the process of transforming old, used, or discarded garments, fabrics, or materials into new, higher-value products. Unlike recycling, which breaks down materials to their raw components, upcycling involves creatively repurposing textiles into something of greater worth, utility, or aesthetic value without the need for significant processing or the use of additional raw resources. For example, upcycling can involve turning old denim jeans into a stylish jacket, using scrap fabric to create accessories like bags or scarves, or transforming worn-out clothes into unique home decor items. By transforming waste materials into new, valuable products, brands reduce the demand for virgin materials and give new life to textiles that would otherwise end up in landfills.

Recycling means transforming used clothing and textile waste into new, high-quality fibres. The company's process involves collecting discarded clothes, sorting them by material, and processing them into fibres that can be used to create new garments or products.

Take-Back schemes

A famous example of take back initiative is H&M's Garment Collecting Initiative. Through this initiative, customers can drop off any brand of used clothing at H&M stores in exchange for discounts on future purchases. The collected garments are then either recycled into new textiles or repurposed into other products, such as insulation materials or cleaning clothes. A study in Sweden found that this incentive to return products is mostly linked to the company marketing strategy that oriented towards the circularity (Kant Hvass & Pedersen 2019). However, it still contributes to educating customers towards environmental awareness. Smaller brands can adapt this model by collaborating with local recycling firms or social enterprises that focus on reusing textiles. By working with local recyclers, SMEs can create their own take-back schemes to reduce textile waste while offering customers incentives such as store credits, discounts, or donations to charity.

Fanfare Label, a French SME, has taken an innovative approach to textile recycling, upcycling and take-back. The brand creates clothing from fully recyclable materials and offers customers a take-back program where they can return their old Fanfare garments for recycling. The returned garments are either upcycled into new clothing or repurposed into new products, such as home textiles or accessories.

Second-Hand Shopping

In addition to environmental benefits, second-hand shopping promotes a circular economy by keeping clothes in circulation longer, thus reducing the need for constant production and consumption. For fashion enthusiasts, second-hand shopping can also be an exciting and cost-effective way to build a personalised wardrobe while supporting more sustainable consumption practices. Many brands and local thrift shops are also increasingly focusing on curating quality second-hand collections, further legitimising the market for pre-owned fashion.

Platforms like ThredUp, Depop, and Vinted offer online marketplaces where individuals can buy and sell second-hand clothing, often at a fraction of the original price. These platforms are not only convenient but also provide consumers with access to unique, vintage, or discontinued items that may no longer be available in stores.

Second-hand shopping opens up new business models for brands and retailers, such as resale platforms, consignment stores, or take-back programs. Fashion companies can partner with or create their own second-hand marketplaces, offering customers a platform to sell their old clothing. This not only generates revenue but also helps brands engage with eco-conscious consumers.

CONCLUSION

As the textile industry continues to evolve, empowering women to occupy senior positions is essential for fostering diverse and inclusive leadership. In this context, the importance of targeting customers with sustainable strategies cannot be understated. The intersection of women's leadership in senior textile positions and consumer behaviour is an opportunity to shape an industry that is more responsible, transparent, and conscious of its environmental impact.

Throughout this unit, we've explored how the strategies used to target consumers—such as promoting green initiatives, educating customers, and offering transparent product information—are critical in influencing sustainable behaviours. Understanding consumer motivations for sustainability and the barriers they face enables businesses to create more effective campaigns and develop innovative solutions. By aligning sustainability efforts with consumer desires for greater environmental responsibility, textile companies can build trust and loyalty, paving the way for stronger market positioning.

In particular, strategies like eco-labelling and certification offer consumers clear indicators of sustainable choices. This transparency empowers customers to make informed decisions, while circular strategies, such as slow fashion, upcycling, and second-hand shopping, further promote responsible consumption. Moreover, innovative business models like Product-as-a-Service (PaaS) contribute to reducing the industry's reliance on fast fashion, providing customers with alternative ways to engage with products without contributing to waste.

The role of women in senior positions is vital in driving these changes. Female leaders, empowered in the textile industry, can challenge traditional models, push for more sustainable practices, and advocate for the adoption of policies that align with evolving consumer expectations. These leaders can be catalysts for change, ensuring that both corporate and customer-driven sustainability efforts are aligned for maximum impact.

As the industry continues to innovate, it is imperative that women occupy influential roles in shaping the future of textiles, guiding companies through the complexities of sustainability while responding to the growing demand for transparency, responsibility, and eco-consciousness in the marketplace. The steps taken to strengthen women's representation in senior positions, combined with effective consumer-targeting strategies, will play a crucial role in creating a more sustainable and equitable textile industry for future generations.

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