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# Sustainability and the confused customer

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In January 2012, the Forsa Institute for Social Research and Statistical Analysis in Germany revealed the results of a survey carried out under the title of 'Project Earth: Our Future'. To its surprise, it found that a majority of the German population had no real idea of what the term 'sustainability' meant with only 8% making an immediate connection between it and environmental protection, nature conservation or the sparing use of resources, and a mere 4% associating it with renewable energy.

In fact, 36% of the people interviewed were unable to give an immediate response as to what sustainability meant to them as individuals and a further 30% offered a wrong or confused interpretation. So it would appear that in an economically advanced country such as Germany, 66% of people don't know what sustainability actually means even though 85% say they have heard about it.

## WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

There are many interpretations for the word sustainability, the best one probably being to create a permanent

balance between economic needs, ecological impact and political as well as social responsibility. Such a concept of sustainability is nothing new and in Germany was first specifically mentioned as far back as 1713 with regard to forestry. The interpretation then was simplified to one of never harvesting more trees than the forest could regenerate in time for the next generation to have the same amount of natural resource to exploit.

Is sustainability therefore an attribute of a product or of a process and, furthermore, what might be the most important aspect or aspects as far as consumers are concerned? By this we mean one or more aspects that do really affect an actual buying decision on a pair of shoes rather than something expressed in response to a research poll. It might just be normal consumer concerns such as appearance, fit, quality and, naturally, price. Equally, other less immediate factors may also have an influence. For instance, are the shoes free of harmful substances, are they 'environmental friendly', were they produced under good factory conditions using environmentally sound processes

and were the workers who produced them paid a fair salary?

If, as Forsa's findings suggest, consumers do not appear to understand the meaning of sustainability, would they in fact attach any extra value to a product that has been manufactured in a sustainable way? If they do, we must consider what this means for shoemaking itself. So, do those of us who are closely involved with the industry really know what all the implications are likely to be? Most probably do not.

## FASHION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Fashion has played an important part in many consumers' lives in recent years, particularly as far as women and young people are concerned. The footwear and apparel industries have therefore been highly fashion driven in order to attract consumer interest and create sales. If there is in fact a growing consumer demand for sustainable products, could we be returning to the 'Good Old Days' when shoes were built as serviceable products and not just for visual appeal?

**PROS**

- Long life cycle
- Fair (normally higher) price
- Renewable resources
- Environmentally friendly production
- Recyclable
- Reduced energy consumption
- Supply chain supervision
- Production close to consumer market (low transport emissions)

**CONS**

- Fashion
- Attractive (low) price
- Design freedom (limitations in designer creativity)
- Technical investment
- Logistics, testing and auditing (cost)
- Higher labour costs

The Mao—or to use its traditional name, Zhongshan—suit so widely worn in China for much of the 20th century was a really sustainable product. It was long lasting, functional and certainly not fashion-driven. The style seemingly remained exactly the same throughout its existence so production was highly rationalised and, at the same time, made maximum use of available resources. It was also a highly practical garment to wear.

A strictly fashion-orientated product on the other hand by its very definition means high consumption of resources and high waste accumulation. And, as already said, a substantial proportion of footwear production is driven by fashion. Can fashion as far as the footwear industry is concerned therefore ever be sustainable? The straightforward answer is no, never completely. It can however become somewhat more sustainable.

A conventional shoe is a complex, multi-component product containing a wide number of different materials taken from a range of resources which makes it wasteful, expensive to produce and difficult to recycle.

- Plain and coated textiles
- Plain and coated leather
- Fibreboard
- Cardboard and paper
- Metal
- Soft and hard plastics
- Rubber
- Adhesives and solvents

A shoe designed from the outset to be completely recyclable is totally different in that it can be made from a single thermoplastic material such as PVC (polyvinylchloride), PA (polyamide), PP (polypropylene), etc. This means that it is both quick and cheap to make using a one-shot injection moulding process. It can also be ground into granules at the

end of its life which in turn can be mixed with fresh polymer for use in other injection moulded products. It does however have limits as regards fashion and wearing comfort and cannot be made from renewable resources. This, however, surprising though it may seem, does not necessarily mean it cannot be said to be 'sustainable'.

**HIGG INDEX**

The Higg Index 1.0 launched in June 2012 by SAC (Sustainable Apparel Coalition) was developed for the environmental performance of apparel products. It was based on life-cycle thinking and spanned the life cycle of the product concerned in terms of materials, manufacturing, packaging, transportation, use and end-of-life.

Higg Index 2.0, released last December, represents a further step forward and now also covers footwear. It is a tool designed to help companies measure and evaluate the environmental performance of their products across the entire supply chain (currently excluding retail) by identifying environmental sustainability hot spots and improvement opportunities. It asks practice-based, qualitative questions in order to gauge environmental sustainability performance and drive behaviour for improvement.

Sustainability is therefore not necessarily directly connected with purely environmental issues in terms of the use or non-use of natural resources although this does have an important part to play. To say that to be sustainable a product must be made from natural or regenerative materials is too simplistic an interpretation of the term.

**RESPONSIBLE SUSTAINABILITY**

Natural or regenerative materials can in some instances actually have a

strongly negative impact on the environment. Plantations for the production of natural fibres or petroleum substitutes can have a major effect on the environment as they often absorb a great deal of land at the expense of the natural environment or food production for human and livestock consumption. They also consume large quantities of water in regions where it is often scarce. Furthermore these natural materials are normally grown in monoculture plantations which, in most cases, require intensive use of pesticides or, increasingly nowadays, the use of gene manipulated plants to maximise the harvest. Sustainability therefore essentially means looking for technologies and materials that have less negative influence on human health, the environment and the consumption of non-recoverable resources.

What then is the rating today for a shoe which can be advertised as being sustainable? It should have a relatively high proportion of renewable materials from controlled sources, be comparatively hard wearing and use comparatively environmentally friendly production processes. It would also need to be manufactured entirely in one factory where production conditions for the workforce were also comparatively good. It should also demonstrate reduced energy consumption, increased recycling of production waste and be continuously free of harmful substances. Finally, it must be stressed that all these factors where applicable should apply for the complete supply chain. Sustainable therefore means everything which does not last only for a short period. Sustainability requires long term thinking and stamina. Sustainable shoes and their sustainable production consequently call for innovation. 