



THE **IN-**  
**DEPEND-**  
AN **CIRCULARITY AND YOUR SUSTAINABLE SHOPPERS** T  
**FASHION**  
**RETAILER**  
**SUSTAIN-**  
**ABILITY**  
**TOOLKIT**

# CIRCULARITY



Circularity has become something of a buzzword in sustainable fashion. In its simplest terms, a circular economy is a system in which goods and resources are kept in use for as long as possible.

The fashion industry currently operates on a linear model of **'take, make, waste'**. We extract raw materials from nature, we make them into goods to be sold to consumers and, at the end of their life, most of these items become landfill waste or are incinerated. A [study by WRAP](#) released in October 2022 found that the average item of clothing was kept for four years. **UK citizens have 118 items of clothing in their wardrobe, 26% of which has gone unworn in the last year, and yet 45% of people bought new clothing each month.**

A circular model embraces a number of solutions to reduce our unsustainable reliance on raw materials, extend the lifespan of the clothing we use and bring it back into the system, or back to nature, at the end of use. Circularity is not a product or business model, it is a way of running our economy and involves collective effort from multiple stakeholders.

Not only is it beneficial for the environment, it can also unlock new business opportunities too. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation predicts that

moving to a circular system could unlock a \$560 billion economic opportunity for fashion.

Retail, as a key stakeholder in the fashion system, plays a vital role in creating such a model and some solutions include recycling, upcycling and repairs, rental and resale. Other solutions include designing in a way that enables longevity and recycling, and eliminating harmful chemicals or materials that don't biodegrade so that clothing can return to the earth safely. It's worth bearing this in mind when sourcing sustainable brands but for this chapter, we'll focus on some of the actions that retail can play a pivotal role in and explore the challenges and opportunities of each.



## CIRCULARITY

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**Marilyn Martinez, project manager**  
**Fashion Initiative, Ellen MacArthur Foundation**

"Transitioning towards a circular economy is the only solution in which we can generate revenue and economic growth for the future without further impacting our natural environment. In the fashion industry, margins are ever squeezed because production keeps increasing. Global production has doubled in the last 15 years, while product use has decreased by over 40%. It is a race to the bottom [on price]. The circular economy provides a solution to get out of this race to the bottom and start generating wealth and a successful business without relying on complex global supply chains."

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## RECYCLING

Selling products made from recycled textiles rather than virgin ones significantly lowers a product's environmental footprint. However, not enough fashion products are recyclable (i.e. designed to be easily recycled).

Around 12% of clothes are sent for recycling, yet [only 1% of these are recycled into new clothing](#), according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. The remaining 11% are downcycled into low value use such as rags and padding.

Part of the challenge comes from mixed blend fabrics, which lose quality once recycled, and the number of components from labels of other fabrics, to zips, to buttons which need deconstructing before recycling. The Centre for Sustainable Fashion in partnership with ASOS has created a [circular design guide](#) which can help you understand how products need to be created for a circular economy.

Retailers can help by discussing recycled materials and recyclability with their suppliers and support brands who design with this in mind. Retailers can also act as collection points for clothing to be recycled. Some brands offer takeback schemes and your store can act as a collection point for them. As an important touch point between brands and consumers, retail spaces provide an opportunity to help consumers direct their unused clothing to the most effective outlet to give them second life.

# REPAIRS AND UPCYCLING

Repairing clothing, once a staple skill and common practice, has seen a decline with the increase in easily accessible, cheap clothing. While the ability to have clothes repaired, either by learning the skill or taking it to a tailor, is still there, our mindset to do it has changed.

However, WRAP found that clothes that get repaired are typically kept for an additional 1.3 years.

By incorporating a repair service into your retail business, it can generate an additional revenue stream, as well as promoting responsible consumption. You could also use the service to upsell items with a personalisation service. You may not have the skills, or the space in your shop, to do it but partnering with a local tailor could be a way around this.

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**Marilyn Martinez, project manager  
Fashion Initiative, Ellen MacArthur Foundation**

“You cannot wait until you’re perfect; progress over perfection. There is no one right way of doing it. Your circular economy position will be completely different than the one of a bigger brand, of a luxury brand, of an intimate wear brand. It depends so much on your customer base, what’s your product, how big you are, what’s your brand DNA and all of that you need to consider. You know what you’re standing for, and then you start assessing ways to eliminate waste, ways to keep circulating materials, or return it to nature. Do not wait until you make it perfect because it’s so urgent that just trying it now is a lot better than waiting until you have the perfect solution that has been tested and piloted in different countries.”

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## HELPFUL RESOURCES

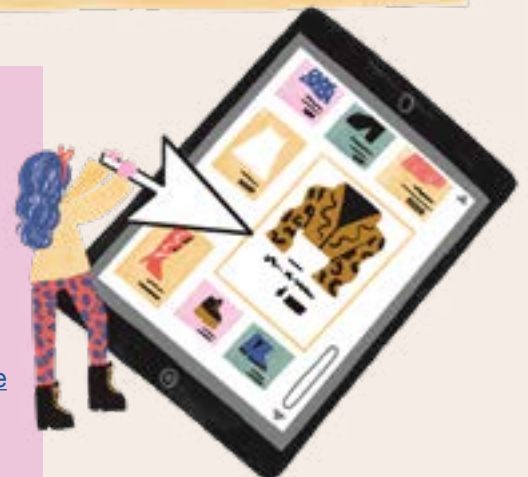
[Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#)

[WRAP Textiles 2030](#)

[Centre for Sustainable Fashion and ASOS Circular Design Guide](#)

[Fashion For Good Future of Circular Fashion Report](#)

[Cradle to Cradle](#)



# RENTAL

Renting has been a trend that has taken off in fashion in recent years and many have touted it as a circular solution for sharing a single item between multiple users.

Some, however, have questioned whether an item that is transported and dry cleaned for each use is really as sustainable as some claim.

However, American rental pioneer Rent The Runway conducted research with Green Story that found that in the ten years of its business it had [displaced the purchase of 1.3 million new garments](#). This saved 67 million gallons of water, 98.6 million kWh of energy and 44.2

million pounds of CO2 emissions inclusive of their own footprint.

Rental makes most sense for items that typically have low use in our wardrobes such as outfits only used for specific events or occasions: weddings, job interviews, race days, outdoor adventure trips. Accessories are also a strong choice for rental due to not being restricted by size, as easily damaged or the need for dry cleaning.

Rental does require an investment in a new infrastructure. However, some fashion rental companies also offer white label services to help others implement it in their own business.

# RESALE

The resale fashion market is currently growing [11 times faster](#) than traditional retail, Cross Border Commerce Europe found.

Sales of secondhand clothing presents one of the biggest business opportunities for retailers with more and more consumers open to shopping this way.

While it does require looking for new ways to source your buy, it's relatively simple to trial with a small selection and test consumer reactions. From large rag markets and vintage wholesalers to buying from your customers on consignment or seeking specialist dealers, what you wish to sell will depend on the type of secondhand fashion that works for your store.

Consider what motivations your customer might have for purchasing secondhand and create a well-curated mix for them. Nearly-new items work well for customers who still want modern style but also want to lower their environmental footprint. Others may want unique vintage pieces to go with their individual style while others may wish to buy designer items at a more affordable price point.

# ACTIVITY SHEET



Fashion Futures 2030 is a resource from the Centre for Sustainable Fashion, C&A Foundation (now known as Laudes Foundation) and Forum For The Future. It imagines four possible scenarios for the world, and fashion, dependent on our response to the climate crisis.

Read the four scenarios and spend some time considering what each of them would mean for your business. Consider the circular solutions that come into play in each scenario and whether they could work for your business today.

### **SCENARIO 1: LIVING WITH LESS**

What would this scenario mean for your business?

What circular solutions are most relevant/popular in this scenario?

Could these solutions work for your business today? How could you execute them?

### **SCENARIO 2: HYPER HYPE**

What would this scenario mean for your business?

What circular solutions are most relevant/popular in this scenario?

Could these solutions work for your business today? How could you execute them?

### **SCENARIO 3: SAFETY RACE**

What would this scenario mean for your business?

What circular solutions are most relevant/popular in this scenario?

Could these solutions work for your business today? How could you execute them?

### **SCENARIO 4: CHAOS EMBRACE**

What would this scenario mean for your business?

What circular solutions are most relevant/popular in this scenario?

Could these solutions work for your business today? How could you execute them?

# The POSITIVE impact of SIMPLE changes



MECHANICALLY  
RECYCLED  
Polyester  
PRODUCES

70% FEWER  
GHG EMISSIONS  
compared to  
VIRGIN POLYESTER

## BRANDS

PARTICIPATING IN TEXTILE EXCHANGE'S  
material change index SAVED

957 BILLION  
TONNES  
of water in 2020

BY SWITCHING TO MORE SUSTAINABLE  
COTTON SOURCES  
COMPARED WITH CONVENTIONAL  
COTTON SOURCING

SENDING OUT 100 ORDERS  
PER WEEK  
IN A 6x9 PADDED MAILER  
MADE FROM RECYCLED  
material

WOULD SAVE  
7 TREES  
PER YEAR  
COMPARED TO A  
NON-RECYCLED  
EQUIVALENT

18%

OF THE PREMIUM PAID  
TO CERTIFIED FAIRTRADE  
COTTON FARMERS IN 2018 WAS  
INVESTED INTO COMMUNITY SERVICES,  
INCLUDING  
EDUCATION

INCREASING  
WEARS

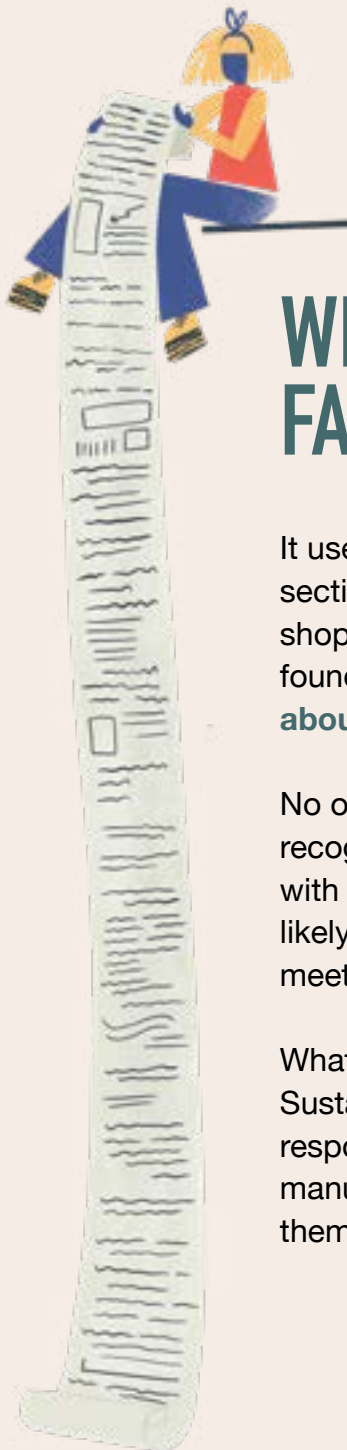
from 109 to 400

PER GARMENT LIFESPAN DECREASES IMPACT  
ON CLIMATE CHANGE, FOSSIL ENERGY DEMAND,  
FRESHWATER CONSUMPTION AND WATER STRESS  
BY 60% TO 68% DEPENDING ON THE IMPACT CATEGORY



# SPEAKING TO YOUR CUSTOMERS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

Many retailers feel nervous about discussing sustainability because they're worried about greenwashing, or they're unsure how their customers will react. This final chapter explores why and how you should be talking about sustainability with your customer.



## WHO IS THE SUSTAINABLE FASHION SHOPPER?

It used to be that sustainable fashion was the domain of a small subsection of customers but, today, it's on the mind of the majority of shoppers. Drapers' [Sustainability and the Consumer Report 2022](#) found that **77% of consumers across multiple age categories think about sustainability when making a purchase.**

No one knows your customer like you do though and you may recognise other types of consumers who have a different relationship with sustainability. Even if they're not talking about it with you, it's likely on their mind so open up that discussion to see how you can meet what they're looking for.

What's more, consumers are looking to retailers to lead the way. The Sustainability and the Consumer report found that 45% believe the responsibility lies with retailers and brands, more than governments, manufacturers and consumers. It's vital that retailers educate themselves to be able to respond to growing consumer concerns.



## SUSTAINABLE SHOPPERS

There is no longer one type of sustainable fashion shopper, instead it's about how each type of customer relates to sustainability:

The **'activist consumer'** is well informed and passionate about living a sustainable life. They are likely to buy less overall but will be drawn to products and brands they believe are having a positive impact on the world.

The **'trend-driven consumer'** is drawn to sustainability as a topic they've become aware of through the cultural zeitgeist. They believe it is important but perhaps wish they understood it better. They're still drawn to on-trend products but look for low-impact materials as a selling point. They may also engage with rental or secondhand fashion to indulge their shopping habit while being more considerate of the planet.



The **'slow fashion consumer'** values quality products and timeless styles. This is often their preferred way of shopping and the lower environmental impact is a bonus, rather than the driving force behind their behaviour. As well as buying premium, long-lasting fashion, they may also be open to mending and repairing their existing wardrobe favourites.

The **'unengaged consumer'** is aware of issues of sustainability in fashion but believes the responsibility lies with corporations and does not wish to change their shopping habits. While they are largely uninterested in the topic, they still expect companies to be changing their practices and will look more favourably on those that do.

# AVOIDING GREENWASHING

Greenwashing is defined in Condé Nast's [Sustainable Fashion Glossary](#) as “a corporate marketing strategy that takes advantage of the increased public interest in environmental issues to make false or misleading claims about a company’s environmental practices and products.”

Making green claims about products or brands is regulated in the UK by the Competition and Markets Authority. It has tightened its regulation in recent years with the rise of more companies making green claims. You can read the full regulation and helpful advice on the [government website](#) but it is summarised by six key principles for making such claims. It says green claims should:

- **Be truthful and accurate**
- **Be clear and unambiguous**
- **Not omit or hide important information**
- **Only make fair and meaningful comparisons**
- **Consider the full life cycle of the product**
- **Be substantiated**



As a fashion retailer you can ensure you’re abiding by these rules by being specific in the claims you make. Avoid vague, generalised terms like “sustainable”, “environmentally friendly” or “eco” when communicating products with sustainability features or labelling areas of your store or website with such terms. Instead, highlight factual details such as “organic”, “recycled” or “vegan”. You should also be clear if these traits only apply to part, or a certain percentage, of a product.

Making a claim that is misleading, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is punishable under the code. However, you could also lose the trust of your customers by marketing your sustainability initiatives too heavily to appear as a more sustainable business than you are, another form of greenwashing. This is most relevant to large high street chains, who consumers are more cynical about, but independents can offer a true advantage in sustainability on the high street if they avoid the same mistakes.

## SUSTAINABLE SHOPPERS

Marketing is designed to promote sales of more product or improve brand image. When it comes to sustainable consumption, the lowest impact choice for a consumer is to use what they already have. Messages of “guilt-free shopping” or “shopping to save the planet” ignore this and ultimately serve business aims over the health of the planet. Marketing also often avoids uncomfortable truths, such as the progress that is still to be made in your business’ sustainability strategy.

**When it comes to talking about sustainability though, clear, honest and transparent communication is a more powerful tool than marketing. Customers are looking for businesses that they can trust, not businesses that have the perfect solution.**

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**Ruth Lawrenson, retail and buying consultant**

Consumers buy into a brand when they trust them. With big brands, we don't know who these people are, and we don't know where the product is from. Authenticity comes with having an independent business when you show yourself, when you turn the camera around, not just to yourself, but to how you've made that product and what your values are.

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Transparency is another key principle of sustainable fashion. Many of the problems caused by fashion production, such as pollution and mistreatment of garment workers, has continued for so long because it exists in long, secretive supply chains. Brands have been unaware of what was happening in their supply chain and when corruption was uncovered, it was difficult to trace it back to brands to hold them accountable. If we are to make improvements in supply chains, it is imperative that they are traceable. For smaller brands, traceability is much easier because they have shorter supply chains, but many still choose to keep their suppliers a “trade secret” and many share their supply base with larger businesses. Small and independent is often conflated with ethical and sustainable. While it is easier for smaller brands to practice sustainably, it's important that we make this judgement based on evidence rather than blind trust.

## SUSTAINABLE SHOPPERS

For retailers, it's not possible to know off-by-heart the supply chains of every brand you sell, but by selecting brands who practice transparency, you can direct your customers to trustworthy information. Transparency goes beyond a "made in" label to provide more detailed and accurate information. [Fashion Revolution's Transparency Index](#), which it creates every year to rank large brands on their transparency, can be a helpful tool in understanding what information should be available to you.

**Many of your consumers might also assume that buying from a local store means buying local or more sustainable products, and it's important to be transparent with our customers about where our products come from and the global nature of fashion production.**

However, many independent retailers do sell local products and do sell brands with a great provenance story. This is a real advantage over bigger retailers and should be shared and celebrated with your customers.



## HELPFUL RESOURCES

[The Competition and Markets Authority Green Claims Code](#)

[Selling Sustainability: Primer for Marketers](#)

[Fashion Revolution Fashion Transparency Index](#)

# ACTIVITY SHEET



Create a pen portrait of the different types of customers who come to your store. How old are they? What's their gender? What do they like doing? What type of house do they live in and what kind of car do they drive? Go into as much detail as you can.

**Discuss what each customer thinks about sustainability and how your store could help them shop and live more sustainably.**


# IMPACT of FASHION

FASHION EMITTED  
**2.1** BILLION  
METRIC TONNES  
OF GREENHOUSE GASES IN

**2018**

MORE THAN THE ECONOMIES  
OF France, Germany  
AND THE UK COMBINED



**72**

DIFFERENT

TOXIC CHEMICALS

LINKED TO THE WASHING, DYEING  
AND FINISHING OF TEXTILES  
HAVE LEAKED INTO GLOBAL

*Water Supplies*

*cotton*

ACCOUNTS FOR **2.4%** OF GLOBAL  
CROPLAND, BUT ACCOUNTS FOR **22.5%**  
OF THE WORLD'S INSECTICIDE USE.  
MORE THAN ANY OTHER CROP.



GARMENTS  
ARE THE SECOND  
MOST COMMONLY  
IMPORTED PRODUCT TO  
**G20 countries**  
THAT ARE AT RISK OF USING

*modern  
slavery*

**300,000**

TONNES OF CLOTHING  
PUT IN HOUSEHOLD WASTE  
BY UK CONSUMERS


EVERY YEAR



pure  
LONDON

[www.purelondon.com](http://www.purelondon.com)



THE  IN  
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AN THE INDEPENDANT  
FASHION RETAILER  
SUSTAINABILITY TOOLKIT T  
FASHION  
RETAILER  
SUSTAIN  
ABILITY  
TOOLKIT