

Sourcing Ethically: Learning through Presentations

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1. Level	UG
2. Pre-requisite knowledge required by educators	C. Some knowledge of discipline required
3. Pre-requisite knowledge required by students	A. No background knowledge required
4. Number of students	Around 40
5. Length of time required	Two to three weeks
6. Type of activity	Group work, Student presentations, Ideas for projects, assignments and briefs, Discussion and debate, Research related
7. Discipline	Business, Cross-curricular; Design, Marketing
8. Topics covered	Big business, Branding, Campaigns, Companies, Consumers, Corporate social responsibility, Environment, Ethical initiatives / brands, Prices, Supply chains

OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To critically discuss the ethical issues surrounding sourcing in fashion retailing.
- To develop students' abilities to present ideas effectively and professionally.
- To develop students' personal research skills.

ABSTRACT

The paper details two mini-presentation activities designed to introduce students to the ethical issues surrounding sourcing in fashion retailing. The activities seek to both educate students and invite debate over the concerns currently being faced by the industry. The first activity involves students developing a mini-presentation following their own investigation into brands that have been criticised for their sourcing activities, and the subsequent steps which have been taken to try to safeguard workers from exploitation. The second activity is based on researching clothing brands that promote themselves as being either ethical or environmentally sensitive. Students evaluate their policies to determine how successful they believe the company's approach is. Students also consider how brands criticised for their policies can learn from more ethically orientated brands, and the benefits and problems associated with adopting a more ethical approach. Finally, as consumers can be said to be driving the trend towards low prices and fast fashion, which can encourage a less ethical approach to trading, students consider how consumers can be influenced and encouraged to consider the ethics behind the label.

BACKGROUND

The activities were designed for year two Retail Buying students within the Department of Fashion & Textiles at De Montfort University, the concept for the activities arising from a wish to introduce ethical issues within the curriculum. Rather than developing knowledge through taught lectures, students were given self-directed learning tasks to research brands criticised for their trading policies as well as those commended for them, enabling the students to engage further with the subject matter and develop their own appreciation of the ethical issues around sourcing fashion and ways in which information is presented by the media. The task provided scope for students to investigate brands of their choice, and hence enabled them to relate the exercise to their specific area of interest. They were able to gain an appreciation of the criticisms faced by the fashion industry and an awareness of what retailers and brands are doing positively to address these issues, hence developing a more balanced view of the situation. As students also considered the consumer's role, they questioned their own behaviour and developed suggestions for how consumers may be positively

influenced to consider the ethics behind the label.

ACTIVITY REQUIREMENTS

The presentation activities do not require any prior knowledge or background information on the subject. Students are required to be able to use presentation software and to understand how to search effectively for information.

As there is such a wealth of easily accessible information available in the public domain, students are not provided with specific resources or reading lists, but encouraged to develop their personal research skills by using newspaper, magazine and academic journal articles plus the Internet and other electronic resources to develop their own list of research resources.

THE ACTIVITIES

PRESENTATION ACTIVITY 1

"Ethical sourcing is one of the most emotive issues affecting the apparel industry today and, as more and more companies seek to reduce costs by exporting their manufacturing to countries with lower labour rates, the subject of exploitation and social accountability will inevitably continue to be raised. And it is not just in Third World factories where the problems lie, since many allegations of poor working conditions have also surfaced in the so-called developed markets too."

Dr. Keith Jones, A question of ethics, 13 Apr 2000,
Source: <http://www.just-style.com>

TASK

Ethical trading has become a very important issue within the textile and clothing industries. As companies source from a variety of countries across the globe, there is a marked difference in working conditions and payment rates which can cause concern for companies involved with suppliers. For your project you are requested to complete the following:

1. Visit a variety of local high street clothing retail stores from the cheaper end of the market through to higher priced stores. Consider the prices of particular types of garments and look on the care labels to identify where they were made.



2. Using the selling price information, consider how the revenue from that product might be apportioned between the retailer and manufacturer. Taking a couple of examples from your store visits, consider the price that the supplier may be getting for the product and how this might affect the wages paid to the employees in the factory that made the product (taking into account that there is a cost for the raw materials and the transportation of the product from where it was made to where it is sold). Whilst for many fashion products the retail price is three times more than the price paid to the supplier for producing that product, retail margins vary widely. Do higher selling prices always mean manufacturers are being paid more for the product? It is argued by some that many low priced products are made alongside products for the higher priced brands, therefore is the selling price always a true indicator of the price paid to manufacturers and the wage paid to factory workers? Collate this material for discussion.

3. Consider the statement made by Keith Jones shown above in light of the controversy faced by brands such as Nike in the 1990s. Investigate ethical trading and provide details of a brand which was criticised for their trading policies, considering how companies are now taking steps to ensure that workers are not being exploited to produce their products. Write a five minute PowerPoint presentation on this topic using commercial examples where possible

PRESENTATION ACTIVITY 2

SELF-DIRECTED STUDY TASK

Research clothing brands that promote themselves as being either environmentally sensitive or based on ethical trading. Choosing one as an example, collate copies of the company's marketing materials (preferably visual), and consider its policies and how successful you believe the company is in its approach.

The second presentation was done in the next session in small groups of 3-6 and required students to create a presentation on flip-chart paper. Ten minutes were given to debrief the activity and organise students into groups (students may be organised according to the brand chosen). Students were then given 40 minutes to develop their group presentations, arranging the materials and the format of their presentations.

PRESENTATION TASK

Using flip-chart paper, create a mini-presentation to include/address the following:

- Examples of the brand's marketing material.
- What are its ethical and environmental policies?
- How successful are its policies, i.e. are the retailers genuinely providing a more ethical/environmentally sound approach to business? Or does the policy just provide good PR and a point of differentiation?
- How can brands criticised for their policies learn from these brands, and what might be the benefits and the problems associated with adopting such an approach?

Finally, consumers can be said to be driving the trend towards low prices and fast fashion, which can encourage a less ethical approach to trading. How do you think consumers can be influenced to encourage them to consider the ethics behind the label?

Each group was allowed a maximum of ten minutes for its presentation. After each presentation questions were encouraged from the whole group.

The first presentation was designed for students to research the topic individually and write their presentation in their allocated self-directed learning time. The students each gave five minute presentations using Microsoft PowerPoint, followed by five minutes for questions and changeover to the next speaker.



EVALUATION CRITERIA

The presentation activities were both designed to provide formative feedback to the students.

The evaluation of both presentations was based upon the following:

- Background research of the subject.
- Use of examples.
- Grasp of the subject.
- Presentation structure and materials.
- Presentation style.
- Response to questions.

In both activities, students were given an indicative grade for their performance in each element of the criteria as well as an overall grade. Written comments were also provided for additional feedback.

ACTIVITY REVIEW

Students reacted very positively to the task, engaging well with both activities. In the first presentation, there was a tendency for students to focus on very similar brands such as major sports brands. However, as the students engaged further for the second presentation, they chose to discuss many niche brands such as People Tree, Green Knickers and EDUN as well as the larger brands like Marks & Spencer and Topshop. In terms of students' research skills, they were all able to find sufficient depth of information to complete the task well. Students developed an awareness of individual companies' codes of conduct as well as organisations such as NRET (Natural Resources and Ethical Trade Programme), Clean Clothes Campaign, Labour Behind the Label, and the ETI (Ethical Trading Initiative).

As the presentations were given in groups, students were able to learn from each other as well as from their own research. Students also became aware of their responsibilities both as future buyers and consumers by debating the role the consumer has to play in driving demand for cheap fast fashion. Students highlighted a lack of promotion by companies to develop consumers' awareness of the positive work some retailers are doing, and of the more ethical products available; they suggested retailers do more to promote these activities. Students suggested the greater use of celebrities to drive the agenda more into the mainstream. They also recognised the

necessity that products will succeed because they are good fashion and not just because they are ethical or eco fashion.

In terms of their presentation skills, students tended to fall into the common pattern of working from a script for their first presentation, which made their engagement with the audience limited. However, during the second presentation, students had to present in a more spontaneous style, talking around their key points more freely and hence demonstrated greater interaction with the audience. Once highlighted, students were able to recognise how they needn't always rely on having prescribed notes to present their work, and that a more discursive approach can create a more dynamic presentation. Hence the activity also had the subsidiary benefit of developing students' confidence in their own presenting abilities.

The only real difficulty found with undertaking such activities was the length of time required to see students present on an individual basis (which was the premise of the first presentation activity). It is, however, possible to ask students to prepare a group presentation instead, an option which I have also successfully used.

In terms of achieving the learning outcomes, all have been met in the author's experience of running such activities, which have now been undertaken with different cohorts of students. The activities provide an opportunity to introduce ethical issues by giving students ownership of their individual learning, and encouraging them to engage fully with the subject matter. Students are able to develop an awareness of the issues, which provides a foundation to discuss more complex issues in the future.

This is an excerpt from:

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Edited by Liz Parker on behalf of Fashioning an Ethical Industry, UK, and Marsha A. Dickson on behalf of Educators for Socially Responsible Apparel Business, USA.

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