

# A promise of quality

*As consumers' shopping habits evolve, retailers will keep their business healthy by offering more quality-led items*

**F**ashion experts agree; consumers are changing their shopping habits. After a decade of deflation and growing disposability in the way consumers buy fashion, they are now turning to buying fewer, but better pieces. Partly driven by the economy and also by an increasing awareness from consumers of the environmental effect of their shopping decisions, a growing number of shoppers are thinking harder about their clothing purchases.

"It's something we've identified as happening more and more, and we will see this trend continue for years," says Maureen Hinton, lead analyst at retail research agency Verdict Research. "People have become more circumspect, the novelty of low prices has worn off and inflation means prices will rise. It all means shoppers will seek out more quality from their spend."

Quality has become a key desirable for fashion shoppers, a trend which makes the COTTON USA Mark – the trademark introduced by Cotton Council International (CCI) 20 years ago to distinguish superior products made from cotton grown in the U.S. – all the more relevant today. Today, the Mark is highly visible at retail, where it enables COTTON USA licensees, ranging from some of the biggest players on the high street such as Marks & Spencer to premium brands including Bodas underwear, to highlight the quality and value of U.S. cotton goods to their customers. In today's climate of more prudent shopping habits, the COTTON USA Mark helps to not only reassure consumers that they are buying the best but also enhances the value of quality-led cotton clothing, something shoppers are increasingly demanding. "Consumers are making much more

considered decisions about what they buy," says Lorna Hall, retail editor at fashion trend website WGSN.

According to Hall, the level of sophistication in consumers' shopping decisions influences how, when and why they buy fashion: "Shoppers ask themselves about value on all levels when they buy – will this piece last longer than others? How will it wash? How many times can I wear it? How versatile is this item? All these factors come into play at the time of the purchase and this process is definitely different today from how people shopped two years ago."

## Proof of provenance

Fuelled by this appetite for information, provenance has become one of the most crucial factors for fashion and textile manufacturers to embrace. The COTTON USA Mark identifies U.S. cotton through all stages of processing and via marketing campaigns, benefiting manufacturers throughout the supply chain.

Intertwined with this demand for products with provenance is a heightened awareness of sustainability and a recognition that a shift in the way we consume fashion could have an exponential effect in improving global issues such as climate change.

In a bid to open the sustainability debate to the major players in the fashion industry, last November CCI organised its Sustainability – a Driver for Business Growth seminar in Budapest. According to Stephanie Thiers-Ratcliffe, international marketing manager of CCI: "By opening up a dialogue with brands and retailers about sustainability we have highlighted the growing importance of the issue for consumers, and their desire for cotton products which combine natural fibre benefits with



sustainable production, and shown how it can be a driver for business growth."

While issues such as provenance and sustainability can come at a cost, there is growing evidence that people are willing to pay extra for fashion items that embrace these ideas. "Particularly in womenswear," Hinton says, "the average number of items per purchase has been going up steadily over the last decade. That trend is changing now and people are buying fewer items per shopping trip but retailers say they are spending more per item."

In this new retail era, consumers are examining what and how much they actually need to get by. Indulgent and impulsive spends are becoming a thing of the past. Today's consumer is showing an ongoing commitment to live with fewer but higher-quality items. Quality cotton clothing is precisely what the COTTON USA Mark delivers. ●

For more information about COTTON USA email [sthiers@cotton.org](mailto:sthiers@cotton.org) or visit [www.cottonusa.co.uk](http://www.cottonusa.co.uk)

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