



In the western India on the border of India and Pakistan a collective of 10 women learn how to weave plastic into fabric.

our products, and to launch two product collections each year using only preferred materials. We would like to use preferred materials for 100 percent of our products; however, we have to balance the two key aspects of our mission, people and planet.

Some of our artisan groups practice artforms that cannot utilize preferred materials or use processes that are not completely safe for the environment. For us it becomes a crossroads between supporting communities with much-needed job creation or using only the most sustainable materials on our list. We can achieve both goals, but it will take time. We start by working with communities that need jobs and, as the relationship and trust grows, we share why it is important to move to more sustainable materials and processes. Then we can begin the process of converting to materials that align with our sustainable goals. We support the artisans with research, logistics and financing as needed to help with the transition. Within a short time, we can make significant changes towards sustainable production. For example, we worked with our batik artisans to help them shift to using non-toxic dyes. This could not have been done if we were not a trusted partner.

In our packaging we replaced polythene with bags made from upcycled saris. Previously worn saris are discarded, but many still have patches of fabric that can be used. The old saris are cut and stitched to create a bag. The vibrant sari fabric bags are fun and reusable compared to polybags, which are made of non-biodegradable material and end up in

landfills and polluting oceans. Moving over from polybags to upcycled sari bags saves thousands of pounds of synthetic material from being produced. In addition to recycling materials, the production of sari bags provides a significant number of jobs for women in need of employment.

We also reduced our inbound shipping-related carbon emissions by 41 percent in 2012, and our outbound shipments are now 90-percent carbon-neutral. The majority of our carbon footprint was related to shipping products from India to the United States via air freight to expedite delivery. To improve our inventory control and reduce our carbon footprint, we now closely monitor inventory and sales.

More than half of our products (51 percent) are compostable at the end of their lifespans. For a product to be considered sustainable, we must not only look at how it is made, but what happens at the end of its life. Handmade Expressions wants our products to merge back into nature through composting, which then provides our planet the ability to recreate the resources. The key to making compostable materials is using natural materials and not combining them with non-natural materials in such a way that makes it hard to separate. For instance, while the cotton we use is compostable, adding a zipper makes the item non-compostable. At the same time, customers want a way to close their bags. This takes a creative solution. Our design team is experimenting with different ways to create bags without plastic or metallic accessories. One example includes a yoga mat bag that has knotted fabric buttons

instead of zippers. For our wood products, we use natural wax as varnish, which keeps them compostable and also makes them safe for children. We track how many of our new products are compostable as a way to keep us focused on this aspect. In addition, we do not use new polyester fibers in our products.

The next phase of our sustainability evolution brought the people that purchase our products. Although our products are made responsibly, we are a very small part of the marketplace. For a larger shift in global production, consumers need to be aware of the practices they endorse through all of their purchases. We share our story and message in our product tags, website, catalog, newsletter, social media and events. In 2012 we hosted an extensive artisan tour in 10 U.S. cities to create a dialog between artisans and shoppers, and we're planning a campaign to raise awareness about the interconnectivity of purchases in a global context.

With commitment and creativity, Handmade Expressions has built a strong foundation of sustainability. I have to admit that it's not always easy to stick to the mission and turn down short-term opportunities; yet this journey is incredibly rewarding. The satisfaction of making direct, positive impacts for producers and our environment, and growing a global base of informed ethical consumers, keeps us going and striving for more.



Photo Credit: Handmade Expressions