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Rubbish jeans: how Levi's is turning plastic into fashion

In an attempt to tackle waste, Levi's has created a new denim range which uses eight plastic bottles for each pair of jeans

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"These jeans are made of garbage," the clothing tag on a pair of Levi's Waste<Less denims proudly proclaims. As straplines go, it's not one immediately synonymous with a company that gave us Nick Kamen undressing in a launderette in a 1985 TV ad for 501 jeans.

But the world has changed since the profligate 80s, and Levi's is changing with it. Waste<Less is the company's attempt, in the words of Jonathan Kirby, vice-president of global men's design for Levi's, "to begin a conversation about reducing waste".

As the company points out, plastic waste is a huge problem; global bottled water consumption is more than 29 litres per person per year, and recycling rates are low — 29% in the US and 51% in Europe. "Approximately 1 million bottles are used every 20 minutes in the US, so our thinking behind Waste<Less, was, 'How do you get people to think differently about their waste?'" says Kirby.

Levi's answer was to create two fashion lines — jeans and trucker jackets — that incorporate at least 20% post-consumer plastic recycled content. That equates to about eight 12-20oz bottles per pair. "If we can have consumers drink out of a plastic bottle and realise that it can become something else in the future, maybe they will be more inclined to recycle it," explains Kirby.

It sounds simple, but a lot of research and development — from the design to new fibre-spinning techniques to sourcing waste plastic — has gone into the Waste<Less line. Plastic bottles and food trays are collected from municipal sites, cleaned, sorted, crushed into flakes and made into a polyester fibre. This is blended with cotton fibre, which is finally woven with traditional cotton yarn to create the denim. The look and feel seems no different to traditional denim, apart from the colour of the inside, which varies according to the hue of the plastic used in the weave: brown, green or clear.

The company has reused more than 3.6m bottles and food trays for the 300,000 Waste<Less jeans and jackets produced for its spring 2013 collection, bottles that would otherwise have ended up in landfill or been burnt in incinerators. This number will grow as production increases.

Waste<Less builds on the success of Water<Less, an initiative the company undertook about two and a half years ago that focused on reducing the water used in the manufacturing.

In 2007, Levi's commissioned research into the environmental impacts of two of its products, including a pair of 501 jeans: climate, energy, water, materials, land use and bio-diversity were scrutinised. The findings showed that the greatest reduction in environmental impact could be made at the start and end of a product's lifecycle. So Levi's signed up to the Better Cotton Initiative, which focuses on reducing water and chemical use in cotton cultivation, and launched a campaign to persuade its customers and staff to wash their clothes less often.

It also designed the Water<Less range, which uses less water in the finishing stage. From an initial run of 20,000, the company sold 29m items last year, saving, it claims, more than 360m litres of water. Kirby says the company didn't set itself specific targets for reducing waste through its Waste<Less brand. "What we were trying to do was just begin the conversation on reducing waste, just as we had begun a conversation on water reduction two years ago," says Kirby. "Our targets internally were to better ourselves year on year by using more recycled materials, alternative fibres, less water; it's an internal [company] desire to use less. Success for us looks like other brands adopting Water<Less and Waste<Less technologies. It's not a solo conversation."

This week a new, limited edition 501 jean has hit the shops which combines Waste<Less (29% post-consumer waste) and Water<Less technologies. It has been made for Ekocycle, the movement set up by musician and producer will.i.am and Coca Cola to "make more sustainable living cool".

But some will argue that without targets, the desire to keep striving to cut resource use, improve efficiency and promote sustainability could wane as easily as it has waxed in recent years; others argue that this is another example of greenwash from a large corporate that has seen a gap in the market and has mobilised its vast resources to jump on the sustainability bandwagon.

Kirby points to the company's opening last week of a new innovation lab two blocks down from its HQ in San Francisco "that will allow us to rapidly prototype products a lot closer to home and really enable us to innovate from a sustainability standpoint" as evidence of its commitment to reducing resource use.

As for the greenwash accusation: "The fashion industry is highly wasteful and it's only a matter of time before people are demanding this type of product and that you re-use resources. To the sceptics, I say: 'Fine. Not really a major problem, but you've got to begin somewhere'."

Back in 1985, saying your product was "made of garbage" would have been tantamount to commercial suicide. These days, "Levi's jeans? What a load of rubbish!" is probably the biggest compliment you can pay the brand.

900 words

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