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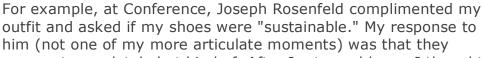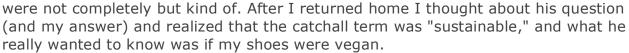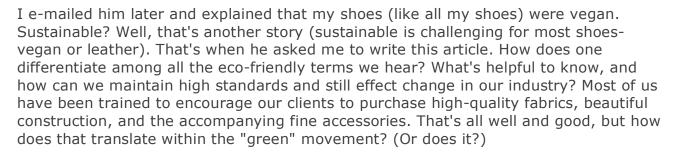
How "Green" Is Your Closet?
Ginger Burr, AICI CIP

What is one of the hottest trends in fashion right now? Anything and everything "green." It is exciting, inspiring, compelling, and, yes, confusing. When people toss around terms like organic, green, sustainable, ethical-fashion, vegan, cruelty-free, eco-friendly, and fair-trade, it's often confusing and sometimes misleading.

For example, at Conference, Joseph Rosenfeld complimented my outfit and asked if my shoes were "sustainable." My response to him (not one of my more articulate moments) was that they were not completely but kind of. After I returned home I thought about his question (and my answer) and realized that the catchall term was "sustainable," and what he really wanted to know was if my shoes were vegan.

I e-mailed him later and explained that my shoes (like all my shoes) were vegan. Sustainable? Well, that's another story (sustainable is challenging for most shoes-vegan or leather). That's when he asked me to write this article. How does one differentiate among all the eco-friendly terms we hear? What's helpful to know, and how can we maintain high standards and still effect change in our industry? Most of us have been trained to encourage our clients to purchase high-quality fabrics, beautiful construction, and the accompanying fine accessories. That's all well and good, but how does that translate within the "green" movement? (Or does it?)

While it is not possible to address all these questions here, let's start by understanding what some of these terms means.

"Green" is a catchall phrase-basically synonymous with eco-friendly and sustainable, implying that something is gentler on the environment, leaving a small "carbon footprint." One would think that simply choosing natural fibers is green, but that's often mistaken, e.g., conventionally grown cotton (most cotton) uses approximately 25% of the world's insecticides and 10% of the herbicides (it takes approximately one-third pound [.15 kg] of insecticide to produce one pound [.45 kg] of cotton). Until we

understand more about the manufacture, processing, and transporting of fabrics (natural or manmade), it's hard to make truly educated "green" choices.

Vegan fashion (a.k.a. "cruelty-free") means no animals were used in the making of the item-no leather, suede, wool, silk, down, or fur. What's left, you say? Plenty – in fact, too much to list. And, with celebrities such as Natalie Portman and Leona Lewis joining the likes of vegan fashion designer Stella McCartney, it's a fast growing market.

While not all vegan fashion is "green," as I indicated to Joseph, this doesn't mean that non-vegan fashion is naturally better. For instance, without heavy processing, leather (which is, after all, skin) will biodegrade. Huge amounts of toxic chemicals are used to tan leather, and most people who do the processing (or live nearby) suffer huge health consequences. And, while global warming experts are finally advocating eating less meat as a way to combat global warming, it stands to reason that wearing less (or no) leather (since it comes from the same source as meat) will also help.

The most all-encompassing term is "ethical fashion" which is defined as fashion that has been made, worn and passed on in a way that looks after people, animals, and the environment. Buying less, wearing it more, and shopping consciously (most of us are already helping our clients do these things) are steps in the right direction. And there are many creative people out there using recycled products-for example, flip tops from soda cans, billboards, seatbelts, and candy wrappers- to make amazingly beautiful accessories.

As an industry we educate and guide our clients in the fashion choices they make, and therefore we have an opportunity that few, other than celebrities, have to influence the direction of the ethical- and eco-friendly fashion movement. The first step, of course, is educating ourselves. This information is just the beginning.

The green movement is young (in every sense of the word), and we still have a long way to go. Not surprisingly, most of the truly eco-friendly fashions are designed for very thin 20-somethings. As more established designers get on board, everyone will benefit. While they do not have to create every outfit out of hemp or bamboo, each step they take to have a gentler impact on the environment, a kinder stance towards animals, and a more socially responsible view toward who is manufacturing their designs (not to mention who will buy it-after all not everyone is 20-something!), will have far reaching positive consequences. The same is true for each of us.

Ginger Burr, AICI CIP, has been an image consultant for 20+ years. Most recently she created a niche as a vegan image consultant resulting in her being chosen as one of the "25 Most Fascinating Vegetarians" for 2007 (VegNews Magazine). Ginger is also Past President of the New England Chapter and has served on the AICI international board. Connect with Ginger: ginger@totalimageconsultants.com.