



The Buyer's View



The president of Bernardo Fashions talks about the supplier relationship at the core of his company's new eco-friendly suede jacket offering.

'Unique' green suede in big demand

A new type of leather jacket is going on sale about now in selected outlets run by Nordstrom in the United States and Marks & Spencer in the UK. They come from New York-based fashion supplier Bernardo Fashions and comprise a new collection called Bernardo Green.

Available in 21 colours, the jackets are made from suede that Bernardo Fashions claims can proudly and justifiably wear the 'eco-friendly' tag. It only uses hides from Hormel Foods, a company that breeds only US animals and treats them well enough to exceed the standards laid down by the US Department of Agriculture. The hides are tanned without heavy metals using a system that Bernardo and its tannery partner, IUV in Slovenia, say is "revolutionary" (it even delivers organic fertiliser as a by-product). And it uses only biodegradable tanning agents, dyes, and finishes during the tanning process.

"When we first looked at 'green' leather, we were driven by profit motives, and I'm not going to tell you we weren't," explains Stuart Pollack, founder and president of Bernardo Fashion. "But over the last few years, this has changed."

His company's partnership with the IUV tannery in Vrhnika, a town 21 kilometres from the Slovenian capital city, Ljubljana, goes back six years. Together, the two companies developed washable suede jackets. To make more of a commercial success of this idea, Bernardo eventually took it to new partners in China, who could make millions, rather than thousands, of units.

Then IUV changed. It realised it had to, according to Mr Pollack. It brought in a new chief executive from the United Kingdom, Greg Strumer, and the two



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partner companies quickly set about pursuing the idea of green leather. They looked at Marks & Spencer's 'Plan A' strategy on sustainability and, Mr Pollack says, learned a great deal from it.

He continues: "We realised that if we were to insist on perfection we were not going to help the environment. Instead, we decided to get something out there that was viable and move the ball forward little by little. We want to move forward, but we

know we have to sell thousands and thousands of units if we want to make an impact."

In this context then, he describes the new Bernardo Green jackets as 95% green at the moment. The main stumbling-blocks are in the zip area: when the jackets first went into production, the company president says there were no eco-friendly zips on the market. And with the backing for the zip, he says his team has had to "stick to polyester" because cotton would not hold well enough.

As for what goes on in the tannery, he is in no doubt whatsoever that IUV's efforts have made the green credentials of the suede indisputable. Commitment to sustainability there saved the tannery and the jobs of 668 people working in it because it convinced the finance minister of Slovenia that the state-owned facility was worth maintaining.

The operation has ended the practice of paying men more than women and believes that 2008 will be the year in which it produces its annual 24 million square-feet of leather without causing any pollution. More than that, as mentioned, the tanning process it has come up with

produces organic fertiliser as a by-product, and—post-treatment—the water it discharges is able to go back into the supply for the town. The details of how it does this are not in the public domain, but it involves no heavy metals and has won certification from the Soil Association, a UK group that promotes sustainable food and farming. The leather is not veg-tanned; the process involves organic chemicals from suppliers in Germany.



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Greg Strumer first came up with the idea in 2002, a time when, he says, the world had no idea of, or desire for, ecological or ethical fashion. "There was no standard for leather, no supply chains, no products, no factories so we had to build it all ourselves from scratch," he adds. "All there was was organic farmers getting no extra value for better skins with the best available animal husbandry."

Back at Bernardo, Stuart Pollack says once again that he has no interest in "misrepresenting" the way his relationship with Mr Strumer and the IUV tannery has developed. IUV is selling 100% organic leather goods under the ROMP label at its own store located in the heart of the boutique district of Los Angeles at 7928 West Third Street. It opened in April and features bags, shoes and luggage in IUV's leather, as well as suede jackets, similar to the Bernardo ones.

"But they're not ours," the Bernardo president makes clear. "We're not saying our product is organic, we're saying it is 95% green and 95% biodegradable, and it's so much better than what has gone before. I love what IUV is doing with ROMP, but we're in the business of selling volume. It's less than \$200 for our jacket, the same price as it is for a jacket in which the suede is neither green nor biodegradable. The consumer will not pay a cent more. The ROMP jackets, which are almost the same, are \$1,600. We're not perfect, but we are going to impact on thousands of people."

Bernardo is not, then, "a totally green company" yet, but the days of this being solely about profit have gone. Mr Pollack's 13-year-old daughter is the main reason why. Pressure from her, following various school projects she has been involved in, has made the company president think about this aspect of business in a new light. "Step by step we're getting there," he



Two of the style and colour options available in the Bernardo Green collection.

CREDIT: BERNARDO FASHIONS

says now. And when environment-friendly zippers that will work well on a suede jacket become available and affordable—which he believes prominent suppliers such as YKK and Ideal are already working on—his company will move forward a little more.

Even with a product that is not quite 100% green, Bernardo has had a very enthusiastic early response from the market. Mr Pollack predicts that, within six months, IUV will be unable to produce enough suede to meet demand. There is a contingency in place for that: IUV will work with a carefully selected partner tannery, in Europe, to run its new organic-chemical tanning process under strict IUV supervision and without revealing the

identity of the secret ingredients.

He believes the buying public will look on the green suede as an added benefit. In other words, they will see the jackets, like the colours, like the style and the look and feel of the suede first. "Only after that will they notice that it's also a much greener product," he says, "and, yes, that will give the product an extra 'wow' factor, but that won't be the starting-point."

Consumers will have access to information on the jacket's environmental credentials on a special hang-tag, made from waste cardboard and peppered with California poppy seeds, which the apparel brand will encourage them to soak in some water and grow a few flowers to brighten up their lives a little bit. 🌻



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