



Lighting the way to sustainable retail

In-depth with Marieke Eyskoot



Marieke Eyskoot is a Dutch sustainability expert, consultant and author of the *DIT IS EEN GOEDE GIDS* (This is a Good Guide) – a popular book with tips on living a sustainable life. Taking time from her busy schedule to chat to us, Eyskoot brought us some inspiring ways retailers can meet customer demands for less waste and more social responsibility.

Marieke Eyskoot is a woman on a mission. She's inspiring people and organizations to rethink 'business as usual' and make changes that don't just improve the health of the planet, but also their brand image and bottom line.

"The retail sector is full of visionaries who have built sustainability and transparency into their DNA," she says. "Standout fashion retailers Everlane, Filippa K and Honest by are great examples." All of these brands have developed a code of 'radical

transparency' that lets consumers know exactly how and where their products are produced. It has proven to be extremely popular with consumers.

It's a huge switch in thinking – from brand mythology to brand transparency, she explains. "Lifting the veil of secrecy on the supply chain can really pay off by showcasing your brand as a beacon of sustainable practice, giving it a contemporary appeal and vibe."

Green is the new black

According to Vend HQ's article '*Retail trends and predictions 2017*', consumers are becoming interested and invested in where their money is going rather than simply what it's buying, which means it's no longer enough to sell high-quality products with no information on their backstories.¹

"Sustainable retail is highly appealing to today's savvy customer with a social conscience," Eyskoot explains. "They want to know how far goods have traveled; Were they ethically sourced? What kind of packaging is used? Who made them?"

The new environmentally-aware shopper is well worth cultivating. "They spend more on less," she says, preferring a quality garment that will last, over a cheap, disposable one. "Sustainable retail can be very profitable. It is also changing the retail promise. Now recycling is cool. Individual style is cool. Timeless and seasonless is cool. Opulence and waste is not," says Eyskoot.

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This move from mass consumerism to personalization is an untapped opportunity, especially with modern technology where retailers can look to manufacture on demand, and use 3D printing and modeling to allow people to enjoy a far more personalized experience.

1. Vend™. "Retail trends and predictions 2017." VendHQ.com. <https://www.vendhq.com/university/retail-trends-and-predictions-2017> (accessed November 9, 2017).

Eyskoot also describes a sentiment change from customers wanting to own things to just wanting to use things. “They don’t need a hammer, just a hole in the wall,” she says. Forward-thinking companies like LENA the fashion library, Style Lend and Armarium have tapped into the borrowing economy, creating profitable rental businesses that also tick the boxes on sustainability.

Lighting that pays you back

Even if you’re not ready to make a wholesale change to your business model, there are simple things that retailers can do right away to improve sustainability.

“Take lighting,” Eyskoot says. “Simply by switching to LEDs, retailers can reduce lighting energy use by up to 70 percent.” This alone can deliver on sustainability targets. But if retailers move to connected LED lighting, they can do even more – from harvesting daylight, to scheduling, using just enough lighting to enhance product appeal, create mood or seasonal ambience.

Retailers can also demonstrate sustainability by moving to different business models, as well as service models such as circular lighting, which takes care of everything from initial design through to end-of-life management with a focus on reuse and recycling to ensure the greatest possible conservation of resources. Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport is now using circular lighting in Lounge 2. This means they only pay for the light they need, while Philips Lighting takes care of the installation, servicing, repairs and sustainability. The new installation uses 50% less energy and has a 75% longer lifetime.

Stores that show they care

Other sustainability initiatives that repay the retailer include recycled store fittings, or using completely second-hand furniture that is sold along with store products, creating a new, sustainable way to keep visual merchandising fresh.

Eyskoot also believes curating goods should be done with sustainability front of mind.

“In fashion or home supplies, think about why you want to stock something. Instead of simply basing choices on price, think about how it is sourced, how it is made and under which conditions. How does it affect the environment? If it’s trend heavy what will its lifecycle be? The brands you carry reflect on your business.”



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In Eyskoot’s opinion, retailers need to remodel their business away from fast turnover, low-profit margin models. “It pushes prices down, people into poverty and over the edge,” she says. “Instead retailers should take a longer-term view with turnover that is spread over fewer, but higher quality items. And if it’s food, locally sourced to avoid transportation costs.”

They also need to offer choices to cater for every income bracket, style and preference. “Second-hand, recycled or vintage should no longer have any stigma. They should be promoted as stylish and unique. For example, so-called ‘ugly fruit’ – fruit that cannot be sold by large grocers due to their strict cosmetic standards – is gaining popularity in countries like Australia, France and the UK, where it is sold as an alternative for those who dislike food waste, not as an inferior choice.”

French supermarket chain Intermarché successfully sold ‘ugly fruit’ and ‘ugly veggies’ using humorous slogans like, “The ugly carrot – in a soup, who cares?” The campaign created a huge rush.

Supermarket traffic increased by 24 percent and all stocks completely sold out. Intermarché has since added ‘ugly cookies’ and ‘ugly cakes’. “Simply by changing perceptions,” says Eyskoot, “retailers can attract a wider gamut of shoppers, and keep them loyal because the brand aligns with their thinking.”

Sustainable practice is best practice

Then there’s the elephant in the room: plastic. Eyskoot cites the banning of plastic bags in many countries as a powerful motivator to rethink retail practice.

“There are some great examples of imaginative thinking by retailers,” says Eyskoot, “Some allow customers to sell back store-branded bags, such as Marqt in the Netherlands and Ocado in the UK. Others offer discounts on bring-your-own coffee cups, returning glass bottles, or simply reusing cardboard boxes with stickers that say, ‘This box may not look fabulous, but it’s helping the planet.’”

But retailers should not shy away from investing in sustainable packaging. According to sustainable packaging developer BillerudKorsnäs, some 72 percent of consumers around the world are willing to pay more for products with packaging that brings sustainable benefits.

There have been some standouts in this field. Swedish supermarket ICA and Dutch fruit and veg supplier Nature & More have combined their efforts to develop a ‘natural branding’ technology. This technique lasers a logo onto fruit or veg, instead of stamping it with a plastic sticker. On avocados alone, they estimate that natural branding would save 200km of 30cm wide plastic every single year.

“No matter what you do, you need to do something,” says Eyskoot.

“If you want to be future-proof and part of the retail sphere, you need to show leadership in sustainability or your customers will drift towards companies that do. A simple switch to sustainable lighting, second-hand shop fittings, serving fair trade/organic catering, or offering care tips to make products last longer is a step in the right direction. By simply using the right luminaires in a display, you can reduce food discoloration in sliced meat and keep your products fresher for longer.”

“Ultimately, sustainability in retail creates a powerful new brand story centered in social responsibility, economic equity and environmentalism.”