

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN CALCUTTA

Naomi Cornelius-Reid's accessories company, NV London Calcutta, has won numerous awards for its ethical supply with manufacturers from developing countries

Taking the decision to set up an ethically responsible, sustainable accessories company can be daunting. The internationally recognized green, blue, white and black swirling Fairtrade mark is now something many shoppers can identify and to attain the right to display it, companies are rigorously investigated and monitored. However, ethical fashion is still in its infancy and this well regarded mark does not stretch to cover handbags.

Products eligible for the Fairtrade mark generally have an extremely short production chain, and are often foodstuffs that can easily be traced from soil to shelf in a few, well documented steps. For handbags, countless stages are involved in the production of a single item from a multitude of raw materials and it is notoriously hard to keep tabs on every aspect of the process.

Ethical and Fairtrade are catch-all terms for many, encompassing a range of concerns from green credentials to provenance of materials and workers' rights. Companies often focus on their eco status, cutting down waste and using non-toxic dyes and so on. This is all very commendable and something I strive for, but what is often ignored, as it is much harder to monitor, is the thorny issue of workers' rights. This is at the very heart of "ethical" production for me. Auditing in developing countries can be incredibly difficult as factories often clean up their acts in advance of

inspections. Even the surprise audit is often useless – it is not unusual to learn of companies keeping double books and sounding secret alarms to give managers the alert to hide the underage workers. That's not to mention the silent outsourcing to secret workers, toiling away for a pittance in their homes. So how can companies tackle this seemingly impossible task? In my opinion the most important, yet intangible, "musts" for success are knowledge, trust and relationships.

I came from a luxury leather goods background, so was well versed in the fast fashion grind. The pressure put on suppliers from an increasingly fast-paced fashion world, where lead times have been slashed from the traditional two collections a year to a now almost monthly output of latest crazes, is enormous. A factory can either say yes, or lose the order. Ethical production requires a more balanced approach and a focus on quality and longevity over quantity and disposability.

However, finding a suitable workshop was no easy task. I had chosen to focus my efforts in India. The World Fair Trade Organization is a global authority on Fairtrade and a fantastic source of contacts. SA8000 is a stringent global social accountability standard for decent working conditions but as I chose to work with grass roots cooperatives, certification to this standard is often an unattainable goal.

I finally found a workshop I could believe in. I specifically wanted to commit to a single manufacturing unit, as it allows me to monitor more effectively and gives that company the benefit of all my orders and, therefore, a sustainable workflow and income. Not only is



Naomi Cornelius-Reid (second from far left) with her team at the Calcutta workshop

my manufacturer a member of the WFTO but it is also a non-profit company, which is a sure sign that money is going where it should; back into the factory's workforce. The management are also happy to divulge whatever information you require, which is essential if you are to know that workers receive a decent living wage and not just the often grossly under-calculated government minimum wage. I found that the factories who ushered me into the MD's air-conditioned offices with promises that nothing was impossible were the most likely to smoothly avoid the topics of pay and production line visits, let alone trips to suppliers of raw materials.

I spent a great deal of time getting to know the entire team working on my products. How else can you get a feel for the people who will ultimately be responsible for your ethical claims? I also went one stage backwards, visiting every producer supplying the factory, whether that be visiting the villages that hand spin my silk, tanners responsible for my leather or the family business that hand-screens my materials.

This gives invaluable first-hand experience of working conditions and a base to calculate how much product the worker groups can be expected to create and what a manageable timeframe for that product would be.

I make a point of returning to see these people at least once a year and spend the bulk of my time with them, even when the business meetings are done. Time spent gently circulating unaccompanied gives a valuable insight into how workers feel about their jobs and the company practices. If a factory is happy for you to roam around solo, it is always a good sign. Often larger companies with multiple manufacturers find it hard to invest great lengths of time with any one supplier but I believe it is the only way to really feel comfortable about what goes on at your production units.

Ethical producers, especially in developing countries, often lack the bargaining power of larger corporations when dealing with their suppliers and are therefore of a lower priority to the supplier. I make allowances for production to take

the "scenic route" to avoid falling behind in a timeline that would result in delays and late deliveries. I also make a habit of reviewing samples and agreeing quality standards with the team in person, to avoid miscommunication. It may be costly up front but it is hugely beneficial in the long run. On the other hand, a blessing for cost saving is the Generalized Systems of Preferences Form A, a tariff preferences certificate, which can be obtained for certain goods from developing countries, resulting in the majority of my product being shipped duty free.

It is a willingness to listen and see things from a suppliers' point of view, coupled with thorough research, close contact and open dialogue with my workshop that I believe is key to both my receiving a product that is perfectly produced and on time, but also, for my factory, their continuing growth, strengthening buying power and capacity to manufacture. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement, which allows us both to grow at a solid pace and flourish together.