Textile Exchange
Building Integrity
a case study

C&A
C&A is a family-owned business headquartered in the Netherlands. The company operates in a number of countries with about two million people visiting one of 500 C&A stores every day. The company prides itself on its traditional values, which have remained constant despite the world changing around them in the years since its founding in 1841. C&A faces challenges every day and has made their commitment to sustainability an important ally in adapting to the constant changes.

C&A at a glance

Key success factors

• Considering the long-term goals and benefits of certification
• Scaling up certification, which increased efficiencies and lowered the overall cost of certification
• Rewarding certified suppliers with increased and steady business
• Working closely with certification bodies to address training and data management

C&A: an Integrity Champion

• Scope certificates are collected and verified for each certified supplier
• Transaction certificates are collected for all organic cotton garments
• Internal system to verify the accuracy of TC’s

What is an Integrity Champion?

Integrity champions have an established policy to ensure their products have adequate verification for the claims being made. They require scope certificates from suppliers before placing orders, and collect transaction certificates with shipments of certified goods.
C&A’s fiber strategy

Organic cotton

Organic cotton is the key focus fiber in C&A’s materials strategy. C&A made the decision to introduce products made of certified organic cotton in 2004, as part of a long-term strategy to change to more sustainably grown and produced materials.

The organic cotton program was literally built from the ground up, engaging directly with organic cotton producer groups, and building the supply chain from there. In 2008, C&A, along with Textile Exchange and the Shell Foundation, initiated a five-year project in India to establish an organic textile value chain that could, eventually, be replicated in other parts of the world.

This model of working up the supply chain beginning with the producer groups is still being used today. C&A also works with some large factories that source the fiber according to C&A’s certification requirements.

One of the tenets of the C&A organic cotton program is that these products are offered at the same price as those made of conventionally produced cotton. Through C&A’s strong commitment to organic, they have overcome the higher costs through increased volume and increased efficiency.

Why choose certification?

Honesty is one of C&A’s most important company values. C&A is a private company and the owners of the company want to be honest in everything they are doing. They have understood the importance of truthful product claims and use certification to verify they are always doing what they say.

The certification system

The beginning

C&A’s work on certification started simultaneously with their work to find organic cotton producers. Working with a certification body, C&A found organic cotton farms by reaching out to ginners who introduced them to their farmers.

This close relationship with their certification body allowed them to use certification to identify a small group of farm groups to work with. The foundation established by those initial farm groups still exists today.

Testing has also been an integral part of C&A policy, to ensure integrity at the farm gate. Seeds and fibers are tested for GMO contamination at the farm and the gin levels.

Supply chain standards in use

C&A chooses not to blend organic cotton with conventional cotton. This policy was established from the beginning and communicated to buyers as part of their requirements to follow.

As a result of this policy, C&A primarily uses OE 100 and GOTS certification. OE Blended is used for ladies’ lingerie and socks to allow for the lower percentage of organic cotton blended with synthetics; even these products do not blend organic with conventional cotton.

For garments with continuous presence on the shelves such as jeans, the stricter requirements of GOTS are preferred over the OE standards. For styles which change more frequently, OE 100 is more realistic.

C&A plans to make the switch to the Organic Content Standard (OCS) upon its release.
Tracking certified products through certificates

Scope Certificates

C&A verifies that suppliers of organic cotton products are certified to the agreed standards by verifying the suppliers directly with the certification body and by holding scope certificate information in their supplier matrix.

C&A collects scope certificates from all suppliers and enters the information, including the validity date, into the supplier matrix along with a link to the actual scope certificate.

Because 90% of C&A suppliers are certified by the same certification body, C&A goes through the supply base directly with the certification body, and checks that all facilities are certified and are up to date with their paperwork.

Transaction Certificates

C&A is requesting transaction certificates for all organic cotton product shipments that they receive.

Due to the large volumes and quantities of organic products, C&A cannot handle the administration of all garment TC’s in one physical location. The actual TC’s are collected and archived at the garment maker and C&A keeps a record of all TC numbers in their respective buying offices. The TC’s are verified through random sampling. The head office will take one hundred random styles and request the garment TC from the respective buying office and garment maker. The head office makes sure that the certification numbers correspond to the actual certificate.

Training the supply base

Supplier trainings happen in multiple steps, with the main responsibility falling to the fabric department of C&A. The fabric manager from the closest sourcing office will be responsible for training the supplier and explaining C&A’s requirements and policies around certification. At this stage, the fabric manager will put suppliers in touch with the certification body who will be responsible for certification. The fabric team then works to collect all certification information. In addition, the inspection team checks for valid certification as part of their regular inspection processes.

Product communication

Organic cotton is communicated on products through the C&A “We Love Bio” label. C&A also has annual marketing campaigns around their organic cotton program.
Learning through the journey

Challenges along the way

C&A’s commitment to sell organic cotton products at the same prices as their conventional counterparts seems like it might be one of the biggest challenges. But this has not been a major roadblock. Because of their long-term commitment to bring organic cotton to scale, suppliers have a better incentive to work on certification. This was difficult in the beginning, but as the program has grown, the costs of compliance have gone down. Cost has not been a roadblock or a hindrance, with a long-term view. As a privately-owned company it is easier for C&A to take a long-term view, which is exactly what is needed to address sustainability.

Because C&A sources a portion of their organic cotton from India, regional issues that plague the organic cotton producers have an impact on C&A as well. The rise of GMO has created a potential risk to the integrity of the organic cotton. C&A has taken an active role in both protecting the integrity of their own supply through testing, as well as working to train farmers on how to manage the risks at the farm level.

Goals for the future

C&A plans to continue scaling up their organic cotton program by 2020. The strategy for organic cotton has shifted from a sustainability initiative into an integrated aspect of their business strategy for cotton sourcing. There was an increase of 149% in the use of organic cotton from 2011 to 2012, and C&A will further increase by another 20% in 2013.

Further Information

- C&A We Care: http://www.candacr.com/en
- Textile Exchange standards: http://textileexchange.org/content/standards
Textile Exchange is a non-profit organization. We envision a global textile industry that restores the environment and enhances lives. We inspire and equip people to accelerate sustainable practices in the textile value chain. Our work is unique in that we focus on the entire value chain, from production, through manufacturing, to retail.

The Industry Integrity platform at Textile Exchange aims to ensure that all of the work that is done towards sustainability in the textile industry is genuine and leads to real and meaningful change. We work through tool development, education, information sharing and collaboration.

Building Integrity is a series of case studies intended to provide practical examples of certification systems. By highlighting the work of companies with strong systems in place, we hope to encourage wider use of standards to support product claims. For more information, visit: http://textileexchange.org/content/integrity-library.