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How Green Is My Sneaker?

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See Corrections & Amplifications below

Are your Nikes greener than your Adidas?

There will soon be an answer to this question, if the manufacturers have their way.

A group of roughly 100 well-known apparel brands and retailers have developed a software tool to help them measure the environmental impact of their apparel and footwear, from raw material to garbage dump. Ultimately, the companies hope to display an eco-value on a tag or package, much like the Energy Star rating of appliances.

Greener Jeans

Greener Jeans | The Environmental Impact of a Pair of 501s
Let's track the steps of a pair of distressed 501 jeans as part of its research into sustainable apparel. Here's what it takes to do it.

Raw materials for jeans fabric

Jean creation
One of numerous routes taken in the production of a pair of Levi's jeans in 2006.

1. Cotton grown: Mississippi, California
2. Fabric woven: North Carolina
3. Jeans cut: Dominican Republic
4. Jeans sewn: Haiti
5. Jeans finished: Dominican Republic
6. Distribution: U.S.
7. Retail: Individual sellers

View Interactive

The Eco Index will be rolled out next month at the Outdoor Retailer trade show in Salt Lake City. The idea is to give manufacturers a common way to look at environment and human-rights impacts when designing their products.

Consumers won't immediately be able to see how brands rate. The companies won't say exactly when they'll be ready to go public with the Eco Index, which has been in the works for three years. But eventually, it could help shoppers compare how green garments are.

Sustainability has proven to be a powerful motivator for consumption of everything from Prius vehicles to conflict-free diamonds and Method household cleaners. It's also been shown to be an effective way to lure shoppers to try new products.

Of course, no eco index will convince people to wear unattractive clothes, no matter how green they are. But a high rating might cinch the decision between a pair of Levi's and Wranglers or attract green-minded consumers to other new brands.

Of course, we're still a long way from knowing the Eco Index rating of Jimmy Choos: No luxury companies are involved, according to the brands. Such brands have been slow to get involved with other new retailing trends, from online sales to social media, viewing their appeal as fundamentally different.

But the coalition participating in the index counts a broad swath of the apparel industry. The brands include

retail giants like Levi Strauss & Co., Nike Inc. and Target Corp., as well as outdoor-wear makers like Brooks Sports, Adidas AG, Timberland Co., REI, Columbia Sportswear Co. and Patagonia Inc., according to the companies and industry-group committees. Outdoorsy companies have plenty of employees—and customers—who are attuned to environmental issues.

Apparel doesn't sound like a dirty industry, but its manufacturing has huge global consequences. Tanning leather often involves toxic chemicals. Making synthetic fabrics such as polyester uses large amounts of crude oil and other materials that release volatile compounds. Cotton-growing is water-intensive—and cotton is often shipped from the U.S. and Europe to Asia to make thread and fabric, then shipped elsewhere for cutting and elsewhere again for sewing. Some of our clothes have circled the globe twice by the time they arrive in stores.

Increasingly, environmentalists believe we should also count the costs at the other end of clothing's life: the garbage dump. Americans tossed out 12.4 million tons of textiles in 2008—a number that has risen far faster than other sources of trash, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Our consumption habits were a lot more sustainable back in 1960, when we tossed out only 1.8 million tons of textiles.

The Eco Index, which is basically a software tool any apparel maker can use, poses a series of questions to companies on their environmental and labor practices—some of which require answers from the companies' suppliers. It then assigns a score representing a percentage of a perfect score.

The questions cover every step in the life of a product, from raw-material production to manufacturing, shipping, and even disposal. For instance, Levi's gets points for having a recycling program that lets consumers drop off their old jeans at Goodwill, and Timberland earns points for using leather tanneries that have wastewater-purifying systems. Points are lost for using bulky packing material or transporting goods long distances. The Eco Index also includes estimates of how consumers will wash and eventually dispose of their clothes.

Some of the points are awarded for changes with very speculative impacts. Levi's care tags ask consumers to wash in cold water, line-dry and donate to Goodwill. All of that earns Levi's points on the Eco Index. But that doesn't necessarily make Levi's greener than a pair of Wranglers, which can just as easily be dropped off at the Salvation Army.

Participants also say the survey involves a lot of estimates and isn't as detailed as it could be, a result of the many types of brands it covers. The production process for shoes doesn't share many elements with the production of a shirt. All the information is self-reported, and the companies don't have to provide proof.

Energy Star ratings, which were created by the EPA in 1992, are also estimates, but they have become an international standard for rating the energy efficiency of appliances. For the same thing to happen with the Eco Index, it must be made available to shoppers at the point of sale.

Some companies are impatient with the pace of the rollout to the public. "Our industry is flirting with getting this right," says Jeff Swartz, chief executive of Timberland Co., which makes outdoor apparel. Mr. Swartz says he's frustrated that the Eco Index coalition isn't moving faster, so Timberland is already putting its own version of green ratings on its packages and website.

Levi's vice president of social and environmental sustainability, Michael Kobori, says the tool will be available "as soon as we can get everybody to agree" on how to publish and communicate it.



This sounds about as easy as herding cats, given the numerous brands involved. It's one thing, many companies say, to use the data internally, but quite another to trumpet it to the world. They want to be sure everyone communicates the data in the same way. For instance, they don't agree on whether the index should be communicated as a single number on a hang tag or in

Nike is one of the sportswear and apparel makers using the Eco Index to measure its products' environmental impact.

Nike a more detailed manner that might involve directing customers to data on the Web.

"It's got to be uniform in order to be useful," says Rick Ridgeway, vice president of environmental initiatives for

Patagonia.

For now, "it's a tool for a company to use to make a better choice," says Amy Roberts, vice president of government affairs for the Outdoor Industry Association, a Boulder, Colo.-based trade organization that has shepherded the measure's development.

To use the index, companies must pepper their suppliers with questions about materials use, labor standards, and recycling. These suppliers get points or ratings such as "gold," "silver," and bronze." Timberland started seeking out leather tanneries with more sustainable standards, says Betsy Blaisdell, Timberland's senior manager of environmental stewardship. "I now have tanneries fighting over the points needed to get a silver rating," she says.

As part of its participation in the Eco Index, Levi's did a separate internal study of its own practices. As a result, Levi's changed its transportation routes last year to make them more efficient and reduced carbon emissions by 700 metric tons. In addition to the Goodwill agreement, Levi's also cut back on packaging, allowing only three pieces of labeling with the jeans—a back-pocket tag, a size sticker, and a price tag.

Brooks redesigned its shoe boxes after finding that its score wasn't as high as it had hoped. When the shoe boxes earned a score of roughly 40%, footwear operations manager Chase Mueller went to work to improve it.

Among other changes, Brooks got rid of moisture-absorbing silica bags, which turned out to be ineffective, and stopped stuffing the insides of shoes with tissue paper. As an added benefit, the "green" changes reduced the cost of the shoe box by 38%.

In this instance, the index appears to be working. Mr. Mueller is now looking to create a recycling program for Brooks's shoe boxes. "I'd like [the score] to be much higher," he says.

Corrections & Amplifications: Jeff Swartz is the chief executive of Timberland Co. A previous version of this article incorrectly spelled his name.

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