

Sustainable Fibre Strategies



Company: Star Sock

Project: ECAP

Sector: Apparel and Textiles

Market Share: <0.1%

Key Facts:

- We want to make improvement steps in every part of the chain, with our supply chain partners, who we believe are able to enforce wider impact on the market in general.
- Decision to buy recycled polyester yarn directly.
- Impact on the Dutch market
- Co-founding Healthy Seas

Key facts

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Ambition

What was your motivation to start sourcing more sustainable fibres and, as part of that, join ECAP?

The main reason we chose to join ECAP was to gain knowledge in what materials are available on the market, seek inspiration to stretch our ambition and understand the steps needed to get there. We had agreed as a business that we wanted to be a sustainable brand, but needed the ECAP framework and support from MADEBY to work out 'how' to get there.

What are your targets and priorities in relation to more sustainable fibres?

We want to produce products that have a positive impact on the world. Our priorities have evolved over time, and to us that has been an important part of our approach.

When we joined ECAP, we wanted to use more sustainable materials and sell more of them, at a higher product price. Our focus was on material choice, as it is difficult for us to make change in wet processing facilities as a relatively small business (compounded by a shrinking market of small dyeing facilities where we can affect change given our size).

Over the last three years, as part of ECAP, we have found we needed to focus on our suppliers and invest in our relationships with them in order to deliver a more sustainable product. We know what we want to achieve in terms of producing a sustainable product, but we need to work with others who can help us achieve this goal.

What impact are you aiming to achieve through your sustainable fibre strategy?

We want to show our supply chain partners that there is a business case for more sustainable materials.

We want to make improvement steps in every part of the chain with our supply chain partners. Although we are a relatively small portion of the market, we believe that if we can enthuse our supply chain partners their impact on the wider market will grow exponentially.

"Over the last three years, as part of ECAP, we have found we needed to focus on our suppliers and **invest in our relationships** with them in order to deliver a more sustainable product. We know what we want to achieve in terms of producing a sustainable product, but we **need to work with others** who can help us achieve this goal".

Willem Schilders,
Supply Chain Manager

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Achievements and Learnings

Key achievements or breakthroughs celebrated so far on your journey to source fibres more sustainably?

- **Decision to buy recycled polyester yarn directly**

We needed to buy a large quantity to make it a commercial option for us, but this has resulted in us being able to sell to clients who were previously not interested in sustainable products. These same clients are now willing to pay more for sustainable products. This decision has also meant we are able to sell yarn to the sector of the market that wants to buy small volumes of recycled polyester – a key challenge we had as a small market player.

- **Impact on the Dutch market**

As a result of our sustainable product range, we have had a huge opportunity to work together with the Dutch lottery. They give away our socks as a prize in the lottery. Therefore we are able to tell consumers about our incredible journey. Our profile has been raised amongst the Dutch market as a result.

- **Co-founder of the Healthy Seas Initiative**

“We want to produce products that have a positive impact on the world.”

Willem Schilders,
Supply Chain Manager

Key learnings as a result of being part of the ECAP programme?

Keep going – learning by doing has been key to our journey. It will take time, but you will make progress. Communicate challenges with your supply chain partners to show that it is a shared journey of improvement.

Be sure to use a third party to verify your claims – this helps to convince consumers, but also supply chain partners that decisions made on fibres and improved processes are more sustainable.

Main challenges faced whilst trying to switch to more sustainable fibres?

- **Cost increase for more sustainable materials**

- **Certification**

The two are interrelated – we need to use certification as the easiest way to communicate the premium price for a sustainable product. However, the choice of certification is difficult as the most stringent standards (e.g. Bluesign) are not widely available in the supply chain. Those that are more widely used, tend to be easier to achieve and some might be considered flawed in their scope or less robust – and therefore not trusted.

However, we expect the need for certification might be limited in the future, as the whole market improves to meet basic sustainability requirements demanded by consumers. Consumers are more aware of sustainable products today than they were three years ago, for example.

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Were there any surprising outcomes that you were not expecting, for example, in your wider business operations, amongst customers or within your supply chain?

Our regenerated nylon socks are now sold in millions of pairs – it was surprising how quickly we were able to achieve this within the ECAP project timeframe.

The lack of connection and knowledge on sustainable fibres with in the large players in the textile supply chain. We found we were the ones teaching our supply chain, but as a small portion of the market our voice was relatively small.

There is a real bottleneck in the uptake of new materials at the spinning mills stage – they tend to only take large orders and are not always open to development of new products.

For others not yet sourcing more sustainable fibres, have you any advice for them regarding how they can get started on the topic and what steps they can take in the early days of their journey to source more sustainable fibre?

At the outset, think about where you want to stand as a brand in 5 to 10 years time. In order to reach that position, do you need to make a more positive impact on the environment? If so, start today.

Be sure to engage senior management at an early stage; they need to be responsible for the success of the strategy.

Accept that margins will need to reduce slightly for sustainable products in general – this will help to ensure that the lower tiers of the supply chain are able to develop and act so that they themselves can be more sustainable businesses. If you are not willing to accept reduced margins, do not decide to focus on sustainable products as it will result in driving down costs and quality, and have a negative impact on the wider industry.



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What barriers from your perspective exist today in order for the textile sector to move to a more circular fibre system?

- **Multifibre garments** – we need to develop options that can be recycled, even if these are synthetic oil-based options that can be recycled fully.
- **Consumers and the recycling process** – there is a need to appreciate the value in raw materials. Once there is value in the raw material, recycling infrastructure will be invested in to maintain its value; consumers will make the effort to take clothes to recycling facilities. Big market players, such as Inditex, have the ability to influence the market in this way and make a significant impact.
- **Biodegradability claims and the future viability of this at scale**

What's next for you? What are you working on in 2019/20?

We have achieved so much more than we anticipated in the last three years, it is difficult to predict what we will be able to achieve in three years' time.

- Continuously we try to improve small things and will continue to drive improvement in our supply chain, to have reciprocal effects on the wider market.
- Build the proportion of organic cotton and recycled materials we use in our products.
- Look to new materials, which might have improved sustainability credentials. However, new materials should, 1) remove a conventional material, not be an add on (e.g. replace all polyester use); 2) have a clear end of life process. For Star Sock, we find recycling easier to communicate to the consumer and so preferable.
- We are looking into biodegradable products, that biodegrade in a short period, but we need to learn more about this option to decide if it is a viable product line for us in the future.

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STAR SOCK

ECAP
european clothing action plan

Project supported by LIFE funding

ECAP is €3.6 million EU LIFE funded project which aims to reduce clothing waste across Europe and embed a circular economy approach.

ECAP mission

Cutting the environmental impact of clothing across the supply chain. Generating value for business through collaboration, measuring and sharing best practice

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Case studies were generated as a result of pilots carried out for ECAP by WRAP and the named organisations from 2016 to 2019.

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