Sustainability and fashion: not as incompatible as they seem

Danish fashion brand Ganni aims to cut its carbon footprint by 50% by 2027 while continuing to expand. How? By replacing traditional leather with innovative, eco-friendly alternatives.



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Should a fashion brand give up leather to become more eco-friendly? When I discuss fashion sustainability with business students and industry professionals, sustainably transforming the sector is flagged as one of the biggest challenges. But the journey of Danish fashion brand Ganni proves that such transformation can and must happen — and it's one of the most surprising examples I've encountered.

Leaving leather behind: a key to sustainability

Recognized for its colorful and eclectic designs, Ganni made a pivotal decision in 2019 to phase out virgin leather sourced from non-recycled animal materials. At first glance, this seemed a risky move. The company was growing quickly in footwear and accessories, categories where leather has traditionally been seen as essential. Reliable, high-quality alternatives were almost nonexistent.

Leather is a fashion mainstay because it is strong, durable and relatively easy to work with. Ganni's designers and suppliers were experts in handling it, which is helpful when collections change several times a year, making skilled timing and coordination all the more important.

However, virgin leather production is highly emission-intensive. Given that Ganni had eco-conscious design goals, the brand rallied behind strategies that would phase it out.

Steps toward responsible fashion

In its favor, Ganni had top management's full support. Former CEO Andrea Baldo and co-founders Ditte and Nicolaj Reffstrup all believe that sustainability in fashion is a competitive advantage in a cutthroat industry.

Moving away from leather meant bringing production and design teams into the conversation from the outset, to discuss the brand's long-term vision and to address concerns about alternative materials, without making empty promises. The culture of environmental responsibility that had defined the company from the beginning was important in driving the change.

Nicolaj Reffstrup prefers the term "responsible" over "sustainable," emphasizing that the fashion industry's sustainability journey is ongoing. He thinks it's unlikely that Ganni, or the fashion industry as a whole, will ever achieve complete sustainability. But that doesn't mean improvement isn't essential. "Not doing the best we can is no excuse for doing nothing," he

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insists.

And while the company continues to evolve under new leadership (Laura du Rusquec replaced Baldo as CEO in 2024), its commitment to climate action remains strong.

Fabrics of the Future initiative

One of the pillars of Ganni's sustainable fashion initiative is the Fabrics of the Future incubator, which partners with startups to explore innovative materials. I've been known to distribute samples to my students, and many can't tell them apart from real leather. Fabrics of the Future already supports over 50 projects, highlighting the potential of alternative materials in fashion.

Today, Ganni no longer uses virgin leather and relies mainly on recycled leather. It also experiments with innovative materials made from oranges and cacti and produces "leather" shoes made from grapes and lab-grown cellulose skirts.

And customers love it! Ganni has registered "a carbon decrease of 7% in absolute terms from a 2021 baseline during a period in which the company grew 18% on average from 2021-2023." This shows that ethical fashion and brand growth can coexist, even in a competitive industry.

MORE INFO: The business case study "Ganni's new skin: Towards responsible fashion" is available from IESE Publishing and is featured in a roundup of best case studies for management learning.

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