

LEVI STRAUSS & CO.



ABOUT DOCKERS®

WELLTHREAD PROCESS

- A sustainable design and production process that benefits consumers, apparel workers and the environment

GOALS

- Create a smart, sustainable design that increases the durability of apparel
- Reduce environmental impact with efficient use of material, water and energy
- Partner with factories that improve the wellbeing of workers

APPROACH

- Filter consumer need and demands to enhance the creative design process
- Constrain design parameters to unlock profitable, sustainable solutions
- Develop a holistic approach to production, building on Levi Strauss & Co.'s history of social and environmental sustainability

RESULTS

- A next-generation product line that is innovative, sustainable and profitable
- Tops, outerwear and pants made with less water and energy
- Fewer factories and fabrics translates into cost reduction and better margins
- Savings are passed to consumer with a 30% lower price tag

INNOVATION IS IN THE FABRIC OF LEVI STRAUSS & CO.

Levi Strauss & Co. has been synonymous with original thinking since its founding 160 years ago. From the first patent for the riveted pockets that helped lend blue jeans their famous durability, to a supply chain code of conduct on labor and environmental standards that remains the industry standard two decades later, the company has never shied from challenging the conventions of retail.

Now the iconic American clothing company is reinventing how we think about socially and environmentally sustainable apparel, deconstructing the design process to weave responsible sourcing into every stage of going to market.

Dockers® Wellthread represents the first time a company has fused sustainable design, environmental conservation and worker wellbeing into product development. The result is a vision of next-generation sustainability that benefits consumers, workers, the planet — and Levi Strauss & Co. itself.

By embedding the creative constraints of sustainability into the design process from the start, the company has unlocked innovation and business value in the form of a more efficient and flexible production process. “The design mind is still delighted by these creative challenges that are put to it. But if we put these guardrails on the activity, it actually has tremendous unlock in terms of business potential,” says Paul Dillinger, Senior Director of Design at Dockers® Brand.

ENDURING VALUE FOR SEASONS AND LIFE CYCLES

The holistic approach of the Wellthread process grew out of Dillinger’s First Movers Fellowship at the Aspen Institute, as the first apparel designer in the program aimed at integrating corporate profitability and social value. Once the concept reached the company’s new innovation lab, idea was converted into action with the help of a collaborative effort extending from the design team to the factory floor.

At the core of sustainable design is durability, creating lasting value that consumers can wear through the passage of seasons. Turning past experience into future promise, a journey into the Levi Strauss & Co. archives uncovered the key points of stress that demanded reinforcement — from buttonholes to pockets.

Durability is about maintaining a garment’s integrity — not just from season to season, but beyond its life cycle. While recycling technology isn’t yet widely available, it’s expected to develop in coming years. Wellthread apparel will be ready, thanks to an innovative new long-staple yarn designed to hold up through the recycling process without sacrificing the strength of the cloth.



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REDUCING COSTS, IMPROVING LIVES

Recognizing the role sustainability-conscious consumers play, the design team added touches such as locker loops on khakis and overlapped fabric at the shoulder seam of t-shirts to encourage hang drying.

Collaboration between the design team and suppliers also generated incremental efficiencies in water and energy use during the production process, delivering substantial savings in overall cost. Drawing on the experience of the Levi's® Water<Less collection, the effort produced an innovative garment-dyeing process that uses cold-water pigment dyes for tops and salt-free reactive dyes for pants and jackets. The many small savings add up: tops, outerwear and pants from the Wellthread collection require a lot less energy and water to produce.

Scale presents the greatest challenge for sustainability, requiring a return to simplicity. Yet constraining the production process to just a small number of fabrics opens new opportunities for creativity and flexibility in design, while benefiting the margins. And by shifting the dyeing process from the mill to the factory, apparel can also be dyed to order — allowing for greater inventory agility and a further reduction in excess material.

Turns out the seemingly singular focus on sustainability is also the key to unlocking business value. Case in point: the savings will be passed on to consumers in the form of a 30 percent lower price tag on the Wellthread khaki.

Wellthread isn't simply about rethinking the relationship between Levi Strauss & Co. and its factories, but also with the people who work in those factories. Going beyond the strong labor and environmental standards the company has implemented, a new pilot program is working to improve the lives of factory workers by using their input to create initiatives specific to the needs of each region. The potential business benefits from these programs are clear, yet so are the prospective business results from shifting to a core group of factories that can meet the higher standards.

REIMAGINING THE FUTURE OF RETAIL

So far, all these changes are being implemented at a relatively small scale to explore the results in terms of social and business value. Wellthread will make its debut in the Spring, and the company is exploring how future Dockers® and Levi's® collections can capitalize on the process. “By having this little lab to test and substantiate ideas at small-risk scale, we're then able to deploy these new best practices at large scale,” says Dillinger.

But the promise of Wellthread goes beyond just one company, providing inspiration other retailers and their designers can draw from when rethinking their own approach to apparel making. Dillinger, who is teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design, is also sharing the new process with his students this fall.

The hope is that as younger consumers increasingly make purchasing decisions based on sustainability, a new generation of designers will be ready to dream up new methods of delivering the goods.