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Fashion Professors on Why Brands Need Gen Z's 'System Thinkers'

By Chuck Dobrosielski



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Fashion is at a crossroads: continue with cutting-edge strategies developed to persevere during Covid or slide back into familiar (yet unprofitable) habits? Get the experts' perspective at our in-person Sourcing Summit, Oct. 19 at New York's Cipriani 42nd Street.

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As the driving force behind the [sustainability](#) program at [LIM College](#), a fashion institution in New York City, Andrea Kennedy has seen [Gen Z's](#) perspective on sustainability evolve firsthand.

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The assistant professor of sustainability and fashion merchandising said she first asked for approval to develop a sustainability course just six years ago. Two semesters later, the school made the class required. Then it added two additional courses. Today, [students](#) at LIM can now earn a minor in the subject.

Just in the past few years, she's seen a shift in the level of knowledge students are bringing to her classes. When she first started teaching the subject, she said she would start out by explaining the nature of the climate crisis—"now, they know that, they're aware of all of the issues with migration and all of the issues that are happening due to the interconnected crisis of [climate change](#)."

"We would teach these facts in the first two weeks and then the rest of the semester was based on solutions, but we would have these students kind of in a state of despair saying 'Oh, I'm so depressed, I'm so anxious, I didn't realize how bad things were,'" Kennedy said. "These students are coming in knowing how bad things are and they just want to change them. And that's what's exciting."

It would be foolish to view Kennedy's students—prospective fashion professionals at a private, for-profit college in Manhattan—as the perfect embodiment of all of [Gen Z](#). But the changes she's observed among her students align with broader awareness of and [concern](#) over climate change, particularly among those coming of age today.

Kennedy advised brands looking to court the eco-conscious Gen Z consumer to stay fully away from [greenwashing](#)—the practice of providing misleading information to create the impression of sustainability. Even the adjective "sustainable," she said, gets into the territory of greenwashing. "There's no actual, physical, tangible, measurable anything in the word sustainable," Kennedy added.

"'Beautiful' is an adjective, and so is 'eco-friendly,' 'environmentally friendly' and sustainable," she continued. "Without telling us how they're doing that—to me, that right there is a red flag.... When you're totally, completely there, you're listing it all, right on your website and it's easy to find."

As the director of Long Island University's Fashion Merchandising Program, Cherie Serota also has a finger on Gen Z's pulse. She, too, advised [transparency](#).

"Sustainability is extremely important to this new generation from the fiber to the final product," Serota said. "That means we, as an industry, need to begin with the beginning—which is the design phase."

Serota recommended brands look into areas of production like [emissions](#), [dyes](#), transportation and [labor](#). She also suggested brands ask themselves questions like “Are we using the most [sustainable fibers](#)/materials possible?” and “Can we [upcycle](#) garments and make them into new and improved ones?”

“[Circular fashion](#) is the way of the future,” Serota added. “We must begin to look at ways of repurposing, reusing, and recycling garments to reduce our carbon footprint.”

To fully respond to climate change and those in Gen Z who are demanding action, Kennedy said brands must change and shift the culture that led them to become what they are today, from research and development to sourcing and production. If they don't evolve and overhaul, she believes some in Gen Z will simply choose to spend their money elsewhere.

“If brands that are kind of either using greenwashing techniques or haven't done anything, if they start shifting to meet these customers—and the store buyers who are going to start asking for it too—then I think that they will be in business still in five to 10 years because otherwise I don't think they will,” Kennedy said. “Boomers, you know, they're not buying a whole lot of new things right now.”

Gen Z's drive to fight climate change could present a potential secondary risk for fashion companies not taking sustainability seriously: the top upcoming talent may simply choose to work elsewhere. Though she hasn't done any official research into the matter yet, Kennedy suspects this dynamic could be playing out today.

“Those students that are concerned for the future are system thinkers and that's what the industry needs,” Kennedy added. “Those other companies that aren't getting those students that think that way will be at a disadvantage in a few years because I think just more and more people are going to be shopping more responsibly as climate change continues to show us that it's happening.”

Other tips for responding to Gen Z consumers

The first thing that must be acknowledged about Gen Z, according to Serota, is that it is a digitally native and a mobile-first generation. She suggested brands allow and address feedback by “democratizing” their social media pages and by being proactive rather than reactive in their solutions.

On [TikTok](#), she also recommended participating in the [trends](#), styling challenges and viral dances of the moment. Content, she noted, seems to do best when it falls between 15 and 60 seconds.

“Remember that consumers drive trends on [TikTok](#),” Serota said. “This is a paradigm shift that brands must get used to as they venture out into this new market segment.”

On [Instagram](#), she recommended brands keep a close eye on their analytics, prioritize the posts users interact with most and remix, reuse and repost top-performing content. Additionally, she said a company's Instagram feed should show brand values, aesthetics and be centered around a lifestyle, not a product.

When working with [influencers](#), Serota noted that a “grassroots approach” is sometimes most authentic and will drive more business than investing in pricier, more [well-known individuals](#). “By associating a brand with a relatable influencer, the brand approaches the consumer on a more personal level and establishes an emotional connection,” she said.

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