

Communicating Circular Design: A ReSuit case study of embedding knowledge of circularity from design to wholesale to shop assistant

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Keywords: Communication; Circular design; Salespeople; Knowledge transfer

This paper explores how garments, which have had circular design embedded within them, can be communicated in industry from the design department to wholesale, shop managers/assistants and lastly the consumer. The research was situated within the ReSuit project as a case study and was a collaboration between design researchers at Kolding School of Design, anthropologists at Behave Green and industry partner Bestseller. The research was conducted in two parts. Firstly, it investigated, through interviews, how designers communicate circular/sustainable design to wholesale. Secondly, a parallel study used interviews to investigate the communication from shop assistants to customers. The findings show that designers find it complex to communicate sustainability and circularity embedded within designs to wholesale, and the information regarding these topics gets diluted as the overall information burden is seen as too overwhelming. It was also found that shop floor staff were not equipped to guide customers towards sustainable/circular choices and that the customers knowledge, though interested, is lacking. However, it also demonstrates a range of methods that brands could draw on to aid communication, namely overview presentations supplemented with physical visuals, diagrams, first-hand experience or changing the presentation location. Furthermore, aids were suggested, such as mini guides, QR codes and websites. This paper proposes that, to communicate outwardly, brands should first look inward, to educate/upskill their sales teams (Business-to-Business and Business-to-Customer) with fundamental sustainable/circular knowledge. The paper concludes that salespeople have the potential to play a pivotal role in the transition to a circular economy.

Introduction

Circular design is complex which makes communicating about it even more so (Knight et al., 2023). The communication of circular design has focused primarily on educating the public on the principles (EMF, 2021); providing information for industry designers (H&M, 2021); how to communicate within education (Joore et al., 2019); and more recently to industry (Hall et al., 2023). This paper explores how circular design, that has been embedded within garments, can be communicated downstream to wholesale, shop managers/assistants and onto the consumer.

Circular Communication & Sales

Much of the focus of this area is on consumer knowledge and how this affects the attitude-behaviour gap in sustainable fashion consumption (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Barriers to this include the consumers' limited knowledge of environmental consequences,

lack of environmental concern, perceptions of unfashionable aesthetics, and higher prices.

Relevant to this paper, the research shows that the consumers perceived level of environmental knowledge is essential for their intention behaviour to purchase sustainable products (Chan, 2001; Mostafa, 2006; Kumar et al., 2017). Yet, the communication of sustainability/circularity in fashion is often fragmented and confusing. Furthermore, as Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al (2024, p.1) point out:

“the increase in misleading and ambiguous communication narratives featuring sustainable values of companies has led to a certain mistrust and scepticism among consumers”.

To address this issue the European Commission (2023) has adopted a proposal for a Directive on green claims. Once the directive

is put in place a company must substantiate and verify any explicit environmental claims.

While brands have to walk this tight-rope of informing the consumer without miscommunicating, Goworek et al.'s (2012) study suggests that sustainable purchase behaviour can be influenced at the point-of-sale. Here, 'sales' could refer to both B2C (Business-to-Customer) or B2B (Business-to-Business). Supported by Leslie et al. (2015) and Brydges (2018) they suggest that retail spaces could be utilised by brands to communicate, amongst other things, sustainability initiatives.

However, the role of the sales person in relation to sustainability/circular economy has only recently started to be investigated (Sharma, 2020; Gabler et al., 2023).

Salespeople, according to Gabler et al. (2023, p.12):

"span the boundary between the firm and the customer. They are responsible for understanding customer wants and needs, adapting to changing customer expectations, and managing customer relationships in both B2B and B2C contexts."

This is supported by Han et al. (2017) who explain the point-of-sale is an opportunity for brands to connect with their customers and share sustainable fashion information. Unfortunately, as Gelderman et al. (2021) explain, the field of 'green sales' has not had much focus but in their study they found that a salesperson with 'green' expertise directly affects customer satisfaction.

Upskilling sales teams provides them with new skills (Chaudhary et al., 2024) and training sales staff has been proven to improve customer satisfaction (Shah et al., 2020). However, knowledge or expertise is not a new desirable quality for salespeople. According to Jefkins (1990, p.85) a good wholesaler must have the fullest understanding of what they are selling:

"It's no good telling the prospective customer he will find out all about the product by reading the instructions supplied with it. A lot of people won't be bothered to read. They expect to be told. The person behind the counter

should know the instructions backwards as many do when one is buying, say, a camera, lawn-mower or a typewriter. Or even a can of paint."

However, if the salesperson is tasked with 'to much' they can become overburdened (Gabler et al., 2023). Thus, a balance needs to be struck in what and how much knowledge is required to be communicated.

Unfortunately, the communication of circular fashion, Han et al. (2017) explains is often limited. While the teams behind the garments may have carried out extensive research, such as how to source reused, recycled, or secondary and sustainable raw materials, this is not carried through to the communication strategy.

Furthermore, as Brydges et al. (2022) explain, for large brands educating/training employees around sustainability dissemination can be challenging and becomes more difficult when the brand sells items wholesale, as their values or priorities for communication in this regard may not align.

This paper uses the ReSuit project (Recycling Technologies and Sustainable Textile Product Design) as a case study (see below) investigating how circular design embedded into garments was communicated to sales teams (B2B). In addition, the paper also explores communication B2C within the brands retail spaces.

ReSuit Case study

This paper explores work of design researchers at Kolding School of Design (KSD) and anthropologists from Behave Green with industry partner Bestseller.

This research was part of Bestseller's 'Circular Design Challenge' activity together with KSD. And began with the development and publication of their 'Circular Design Guidelines' (CDG) version 1 (Bestseller, 2022), created to communicate circular design strategies to Bestsellers own designers (see Figure 1). The challenge asked Bestseller brands to create circular garments using the guidelines. This research investigates how these designs were communicated to the wholesale departments.

In addition, anthropologists at Behave Green conducted a parallel investigation into consumer behaviour and the communication of sustainable initiatives and circular design in a series of Bestseller stores.



Figure 1. Circular Design Framework from Bestseller's Circular Design Guidelines version 1, (Bestseller, 2022)

Methods

This research was split into two parts. The first used interviews of eight Bestseller brands who participated in the Circular Design Challenge across markets, including men, women, plus size and children. Interviews were semi-structured (Flick, 2009) and conducted online with a diverse range of employees from each brand that actively participated in the challenge (see Table 1). The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis (Flick, 2009) to draw out connections and relationships.

The second part of the research explored the perspectives of customers, staff, and store managers regarding the communication of sustainability at two Bestseller Brands. The research presented here was part of a larger study, with only findings relevant to this paper included. Across the whole study, a range of interviewing methods was used, including 84 mini-interviews with customers in four city-centre store locations. Store managers were informally interviewed for their perspectives, and in-depth customer interviews and user journeys were conducted with a small group (6 women, 2 men, and 7 teenagers) recruited in-

store. The interview data was analysed qualitatively (Flick, 2009) focusing on pattern recognition to identify recurring themes, attitudes, and behaviours related to sustainability communication.

Table 1. Summary of the interviewed designers/product developers within the brands.

Brand	Job Title
1	Designer
	CSR and Sustainability Responsible
2	Sustainability Responsible
3	Designer
4	Supply Chain Management and Quality Responsible
	Design Manager
	3D Developer
5	Sustainability Manager
6	Designer
7 & 8	Creative Buyer
	Team Leader
	Sustainability Responsible

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts representing the two halves of the research. First exploring how design communicates to sales and second communication from shop to customer.

Communication from Design to Sales

During the interviews of the Bestseller design teams the researchers explored how they communicated their circular design concepts to wholesale which could be used to disseminate to their customers (B2B and B2C). The findings are discussed across three themes: communication volumes, communication selection, and communication methods.

Communication volumes

Across all the brands interviewed there was a consensus that to fully understand the circular design embedded in the garments (including materials, production, use and recovery as specified in Bestseller's (2022) CDG) would require a significant amount of information to be communicated. It was raised by one

interviewee that the types of information the sales team is required to know:

"it's insane what they have to remember...this price was changed to this and now we put this in that colour, now we change the length of this dress. This is in a repeat and this and that"

The addition of circularity details would require the sales team to remember an additional set of details. This was seen as a burden and therefore, the brand explained their strategy was to provide:

"something that's so bulletproof and clear because in one collection you have so many different approaches, stories, new fibres that they have to remember"

The challenge of editing information to create a concise and clear message was also highlighted.

"Trying to eliminate unnecessary knowledge but still have them informed was perhaps the biggest challenge"

Another brand stressed that to avoid the overload of information that the 'selling points' of the circular design, especially those that they were more familiar with could be the focus.

"the recycled cotton...these were just some really easy selling points of the products"

This method is one of information selectivity which will be explored further in the next section.

Selecting communication

A common challenge was the technical details of information that had to be omitted when communicating with sales.

"if it gets too technical it will be lost in translation"

In addition, the background work of creating a more circular product was also often excluded. For example, one brand worked with their supplier to recycle offcuts to produce a recycled cotton.

"we didn't talk too much into how the cut-offs and how they are reusing it...maybe we didn't go that much into that story"

Whilst this type of storytelling could be picked up by marketing it was omitted for the sales teams. Instead, the information was simplified to 'made from recycled cotton'.

In another example a brand excluded discussing how they had started to wear test their garments.

"this whole testing framework... that's impossible to explain to an end consumer at this level. So that was internal work. So no, actually we only put the word on that it's made for longevity. You can wear it for long time. ...it has to be these simple words. We can't explain other things like that. I would say that would be a bit hard."

This demonstrates that there is a lot of work embedded within the circular design that is not communicated to sales and by extension the consumer.

The concept of including only the most relevant and easy to understand messages was echoed across many of the interviews. Achieving simple and effective communication about the circular concepts was key to ensure their buy-in and to promote these garments at wholesale.

"if we show from the beginning how they can communicate it and give them something, then probably they are more likely to buy into it instead of saying 'ohh that's too tricky for me to communicate so then I rather leave it'"

The methods used to communicate are addressed in the next section.

Communication methods

One of the main issues that brands repeatedly explained was how the sales teams would not be able to retain the information and the need for prompts was highlighted.

"for our sales team when we deliver the collection to them, they cannot remember all that information if it's not stated on the actual product"

Across all the interviews the brands discussed a range of different communication methods to support the sales and communication to the customer (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of the methods brands used to communicate circular design

Method	Quote
Presentations	<p>“we have a the internal in-house sales meeting where we present the collection and at this time it's usually our designers who present the collection we are going to sell”</p> <p>“the only thing what we have done differently... was a general explanation of circularity what the four phases are.... and doing the presentation to our country sales managers, we actually explained what is it about”</p>
Physical Aids	<p>“we had in the stand...some plastic bottles that we asked the kitchen if they could save the pant to explain the process of the recycled polyester”</p> <p>“The plan was actually also to make the circular design guide in a mini format, like a pocket version so it's easier for them to also explain to the customers what's actually has been fulfilled on each product.”</p>
Visual Aids	<p>“we printed out two lay plans - the before and the after... the biggest one...was a 50% difference on waste. So they could have it very visually “</p>
Person	<p>““we made a stand in the in the sales meeting... we had the VFX model with the 3D style on. And the model was there as well... she has never seen</p>

	herself in those clothes and she was sharing that experience as well with the and sales representatives”
Location	“we took ...the beachwear out of the office environment, down to the harbour...I know it's a bit cheesy, but it made them think differently about the project than when we stand in the showroom...they can understand it as a package and a shift their values.”
Hangtags	<p>“you can always have it on a hangtag, but then when the hangtag is taken off there's no message”</p> <p>“a hangtag where we had these tick off boxes so you could tick off what we have done. But we are not allowed to do that because then we need to explain 100% what has been done and then we end up with the 100 hang tags and that doesn't make sense”</p>
QR codes	<p>“we made the QR codes to guide them that they could just stand with the customer, scan it and then they will run through the whole story”</p> <p>“I think there were only worried little bit about the communication to our customers. They could see it because they could also scan the QR code. They could see what we are communicating. They were like, OK, this is super cool”</p>
Video	“one of the designers and myself did a video where I talked generally about the concept of the circular design guide and he talked more about the

	products so that they have also a small video to support them in the showrooms"
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Across the methods presentations were one of the most common methods which was explained by one brand as part of normal working practices. These were often simple PowerPoints outlining the circular design concept and selling points. This could also be supported with visual aids.

However, we can also see the designers got creative. For example, *one* brand moved their presentation out of the office to communicate the story of circular design. Physical aids were leant on such as mini-guides and illustrative items (such as plastic bottles to help explain recycling processes).

Furthermore, video was a popular method. This type of content is not only useful for sales but can double up (if created far enough in advance with the help of marketing) to communicate to the customer. However, as pointed out by one interviewee this also needs to be quick, clear and concise.

"We normally can only use a max of nineteen seconds. It has to be said in that time, otherwise people lose interest."

Another popular method to support sales was the use of QR codes leading to webpages with information relating to circularity. However, the amount of work that goes into making this form of communication was also acknowledged. For smaller brands they did not have the resources and even the larger brands found it resource heavy.

"And then we were talking about a QR code. But again, right now for us as a small brand we cannot make that much marketing material"

"it's a huge job to make this landing page with a QR code, a huge job. It could maybe seem easy, but it's not. There's a lot of work behind that"

The latter brand explained that it would not be option to have a QR code leading to a landing

page for every style. Therefore, other solutions would need to be found.

Others considered hangtags with information on them to support sales teams, however this method was rejected due to volume of information and longevity of the communication for customer. *This highlights the issue of what is required/allowed to be communicated. Furthermore, mentions of speaking to the respective brands legal department came up in the interviews and the challenge of greenwashing was raised directly by one interviewee.*

"Working with today these terms about sustainability, about circularity that is so fragile within green washing"

This demonstrates the fine line that has to be navigated by the brands to communicate the circular work they are doing.

Communication from Shop to Customer

In the second part of the research both consumers and shop managers from two bestseller brands were interviewed. Relevant for this paper were the customers responses to questions regarding their level of knowledge of circularity/sustainability and the factors that influence a purchase in this regard. To compliment this the store managers were also asked about their knowledge and thereby explore both perspectives on this issue.

First, the researchers asked customers what they associated with 'sustainable clothing.' It was found that most respondents had a hard time answering the question. As the literature suggests (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021), sustainability plays a minimal role when customers shop for new clothes. This was supported as the research found customers had difficulties in making sustainable choices. This was largely due to the overwhelming presence of 'green' marketing. While most participants had learned about environmental issues in school, few connected these to the textile industry. However, some respondents clearly expressed curiosity about sustainability in textiles, raising questions such as:

'How are clothes produced?'

'Can clothing be made from reused materials?'

'What happens to clothes when we no longer use them?'

When answering questions about the purchase situation, customers not only highlighted price and size but also the importance of the guidance and expertise from the sales assistant, but that they had a 'lack of knowledge' about sustainability.

"I have tried to ask a sales assistant what it means when clothes are recycled. She couldn't give me an answer. So in general, I think we lack knowledge about this matter. I usually do not expect much from the sales assistants because I know that most of them do not have the knowledge. Instead, I expect to find answers to my questions on the brands' websites."

Additionally, when interviewing the shop staff, they struggled to define or explain what 'sustainable clothing' was. This is not the fault of the staff themselves, but rather highlights a gap in their training. One of the shop managers emphasised the issue:

"We are not getting any training about sustainability - we just get a little bit of information we can use in the sales situation"

Some of the store managers mentioned that their employees could benefit from more information about sustainable clothing and textile production. By learning more about these matters, they explained, it would be easier for them to guide their customers.

Discussion & Conclusion

Embedding circular design strategies is certainly challenging for the industry designers (Hall et al., 2023). For example, designers might have to source recycled materials; explore how waste can be reduced during production with their suppliers; implement features that will encourage the customer to use it for longer (such as multifunctionality) and finally ensure all these choices do not prohibit the garment from entering recycling systems. Yet, communicating these efforts through internal levels from wholesale to the sales assistant and onto the consumer poses a different challenge.

The efforts made by design for circularity is complex. The research highlights how the information gets reduced through a selection process and details are lost as it filters through the sales systems. We can conclude that sustainability and circularity are not well understood by sales teams and becomes an additional but not necessarily integrated aspect that B2B sales teams have to communicate to their clients.

While the designers are 'selecting' circular design information to be used by salespeople, this appears to be treated as beneficial 'add on' rather than a fundamental part of their sales pitch. Thus, as the information filters down to the customer and via stores the information is also less likely to be highlighted. This challenge was also echoed by the store managers that the basic knowledge in this area is missing. Alongside this the customer also lacks but is interested in this knowledge but the sales assistants are not equipped to help answer their questions. Therefore, this research suggests that educating sales teams (B2B and B2C) with a fundamental understanding of circularity could help address these challenges, enabling them to both understand and communicate the more complex circular details embedded by design into the garments.

Furthermore, the findings go beyond pointing out the challenges and offer a range of methods to be explored in future research. The bestseller brands, through their efforts to establish communication during the circular design challenge, provide a range of examples to both educate and communicate to sales teams.

Firstly, the brands educated by providing an overview of the circular design framework (see Bestseller, 2022) and how it related to their specific design and secondly, they supported sales communication efforts by creating aids. The former (overview) was materialised mostly as a presentation. However, within this a range of visual methods were employed, such as physical items (plastic bottles to explain the recycling process); diagrams ('before and after' lay patterns demonstrating the reduction in waste); people (a model used to shoot digital samples spoke about her experience) and location (one brand shifted the location of a

presentation to emphasise the importance of the work being created).

The latter (communication aids) were threefold. First, a mini guide was proposed. A quick glance version of the circular design guide (Bestseller, 2022) as a reference. Second, QR codes on the garments so that both sales and clients (B2B) and customers (B2C) could access this information. Thirdly, related to the QR codes where the webpages themselves, which could be present without the QR code. This also stands to benefit the customer, as pointed out by one in-store interviewee that this is where they actively go to seek information because she cannot get it via the sales assistants.

It is clear from our findings that aids alone, such as web pages, are not enough. Aside from the technical and time heavy challenges of producing these, both wholesale and those working in the shops require a basic understanding to support clients/customers to communicate the circular/sustainable value that have been embedded into garments by design teams. Therefore, to communicate outwardly, we recommend brands first look inward at how knowledge is transferred to sales as they have the potential to play a pivotal role in the transition to a circular economy. Thus, we advocate for further research to explore how a fundamental understanding of circular design can be imparted to sales (for example, if selectively of information must be done, what is selected B2B and B2C?). This is before aids can be employed to provide the details of how circularity has been embedded. Furthermore, if the sales role does hold this potential, further research could explore how they go beyond just communication and encourage circular practices such as maintaining, repairing, and repurposing to change behaviour/mindsets in the transition to a circular economy.

Acknowledgments

This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without the support of the sustainability team at Bestseller including Emma Bach Nørbæk and Malene Schalck Rasmussen. We would like to thank all the Brands that were involved in the Circular Design Challenge and those that work in the stores who gave up their time to be interviewed. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the

Innovation Fund Denmark for funding this work as part of ReSuit project.

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