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Term Project - Part II: J. Crew's Field Jacket Supply Chain Solution

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J.Crew is a fast fashion company with a focus on the coastal style of the Eastern seaboard that creates and sells its own brand clothing exclusively in its stores. Garments for men, women and children are available at a moderate price point. Single and married college-educated women, 24-45 years old, who fall into the middle-class and upper middle-class categories and who like to stay active, are the brand's primary target market. The J.Crew Field Jacket is a classic silhouette in rich olive green color composed of 100% cotton, gold-tone metal buttons and gold-tone zipper sold in J.Crew's Fall/Winter 2015/2016 offerings. Other materials in the production of the garment include fabric dye, heavy stitching and trim, and a chemical fabric finishing.

Sustainability Concern

J.Crew has two distribution facilities with differing functions, one in Asheville, North Carolina and one in Lynchburg, Virginia ("Annual report," 2019). The Asheville, North Carolina location coordinates retail store product distribution and Lynchburg, Virginia handles logistical coordination and mailing of online retail orders ("Annual report," 2019). For the purposes of this review, the focus will be e-commerce distribution center and the primary sustainability issue at this location, the packaging.

At the Lynchburg distribution facility, purchases made on the brand's online retail site are pulled, packaged and shipped directly to consumers. The packaging used for orders involves a durable, thick, opaque plastic outer bag, thin, clear plastic bag with sticker closure on each item, paper invoice, and a paper-based sticker mailing label (Macasadia, *personal experience*, 2021). This packaging is a significant sustainability concern. Plastic bags can take up to 500 years to decompose in a landfill ("The problem," n.d.) and in most areas, single-use plastic bags are not accepted at recycling centers (Lindwall, 2020). The alternative to decomposition of plastic bags in landfills, is incineration. Incineration may seem like the less harmful option, however, as these plastics burn, they release harmful toxins (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). Beyond the damage to the Earth and atmosphere, plastic bags have

caused the death of 100,000 marine animals annually (“The problem,” n.d.). The paper invoice is the only component of the packaging that is minimally damaging, decomposing in just two to six weeks and able to be recycled up to six times without losing its strength (“How long,” 2019).

J.Crew should address this sustainability concern of packaging first, above the others they are facing. Energy impacts in direct ways and indirect ways are a significant concern for retailers in terms of sustainability (Dunbar, 2019). One of the most direct ways to combat energy use for retailers is changing to LED bulbs from traditional store lighting (Dunbar, 2019), which J.Crew has already done (“Shopping,” n.d.). Another impact on energy is the release of greenhouse gases methane and ethylene which occurs in landfills due to plastic’s slow decomposition and even recycled plastics produce these harmful gases (Cho, 2020). In addition, with the rate of online shopping continuing to increase in the 21st century, with U.S. online retail sales dollars in 2020 exceeding 4.2 trillion (Coppola, 2021), this change will be incredibly impactful. This sustainability concern is one that J.Crew can relatively quickly reduce which will impact the environment positively while being a visible commitment to sustainability for the consumer, which will result in positive public image for the brand.

Potential Solution

J.Crew needs to reconsider its packaging choices for distribution of online shopping purchases to consumers. The solution to this issue is multi-faceted. First, eliminating the paper invoice included in shipments is an easy step to reduced environmental impact. This piece is not used for returns, as the process for return includes an electronic processing form which requires printing another invoice and shipping label (“Returns,” n.d.), so there remains no use for this item. Eliminate it. The next step in transforming the packaging issue is the elimination of the inner thin plastic bags enclosing each individual garment. A better option is to wrap the group of garments in a paper wrap or opt not to have

another packaging component at all. The most significant solution available for this sustainability issue is a change to a more environmentally friendly outer packaging.

Transitioning to a more sustainable packaging option is the most effective way to reduce environmental impact while continuing e-commerce business. Corn starch packaging is a material made from a process involving polylactic acid and decomposes after a number of months versus hundreds of years for plastic (Murray, 2019). This packaging can be used as a replacement for the thick outer plastic packaging bag currently used. Making a change from plastic packaging to corn starch packaging is a sustainable solution J.Crew can implement in their distribution center in Lynchburg.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Potential Solution

There are both advantages and disadvantages to the change from current packaging to more sustainable packaging for the J.Crew Lynchburg distribution facility. An advantage of switching to a sustainable packaging option is the image benefit to the brand. This change will allow J.Crew to advertise their sustainable efforts to their target market, which aligns with the age range most concerned with sustainability in retail purchases (Cheng, 2019). The switch to corn starch packaging reduces the impact on the environment by reducing the decomposition time – plastics take up to 500 years to decompose (“The problem,” n.d.) whereas cornstarch packaging takes three to six months to decompose (Serle, n.d.), this means less greenhouse gas released to the atmosphere. Corn starch packaging also will not kill marine animals.

One possible disadvantage of making the switch to corn starch packaging is the difference in cost versus that of plastic packaging (Owens, 2019). Plastic is readily available and the demand for single use plastics along with the increasing cost of recycling processing means that it is easier and less expensive to use single use plastic bags, rather than sustainable materials (Kramer, 2016). Another possible disadvantage of corn starch packaging is that consumers may point out that corn starch

packaging may not decompose if not under the correct conditions (Murray, 2019) and is not technically zero waste (Owens, 2019). Corn starch packaging has quick decomposition, typically within six months, but only if the packaging is exposed to oxygen and natural sunlight (Murray, 2019).

Mitigating these disadvantages is possible, with the correct frame of mind and approach. The solution for the increased cost is a revised viewpoint of true cost. Cost in terms of expense may be higher for the corn starch packaging, but the intangible costs to the environment and humanity for the continued use of plastic single use bags is much higher in the long run. J.Crew can leverage the sustainability angle to increase their consumer loyalty, as customers state sustainability as the second highest reason for loyalty to a brand, only behind quality of product ("Survey," 2019). The second disadvantage of this packaging not being truly zero waste can be handled simply through education of the consumer. While corn starch packaging may not be zero waste, it is far less damaging than the plastic packaging and allows consumers to continue receiving shipments in durable packaging.

J.Crew has not yet implemented a sustainable shipping packaging solution. Why is this? Cost may be the number one factor. As previously stated, the cost of sustainable packaging in terms of actual expense is higher than the plastic currently being used. The brand may also have not pursued this change yet as it would require the identifying and vetting of new suppliers and establishing new systems within the warehouse processes, which results in costs of time and effort expended in making such a change. A new supplier may be further from the distribution center, thus incurring greater costs to the company in receiving the packaging components.

Conclusion

In conclusion, J.Crew faces sustainability concerns in many areas. One area where there may be a solution for the concern faced is the distribution component of the supply chain. By changing the type of package used, J.Crew can reduce its environmental footprint and increase consumer loyalty in its

target market. Though there may be some costs, in the long term, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages – for the planet and the brand.

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