

American Apparel



Household names are hard to achieve, but with a push to re-invent the wheel in a cool hip, no-nonsense way, American Apparel has become just that. No color or style unturned, they are America's t-shirt... and leggings... and mini dress... you get the idea. Nolcha talks to reknowned American Apparel about cost effective manufacturing, production runs and fabric selection...

Lynn Furge: How did a company that started with the simple concept of growing organic food on their own farm turn into a fashion label that sells and the world's most prestigious retailers?

Maira Genovese: The Bamford way is about Truth, Transparency and Trust. These elements work in all aspects of the company. Carole Bamford wanted to feed her family local organic produce so she turned her farm Daylesford green 20 years ago. The fashion labels and the new body line were just extensions of the overall vision of respect for the environment, care and understanding of the laborers mixed with taste and beauty.

LF: How do you incorporate a luxury lifestyle into organic living?

MG: We have a commitment to responsible production however, we do believe that organic can still be luxurious. We choose to hand-knit cashmere or dye with vegetable dyes. We also use eco-friendly practices when tanning leather.

LF: So what in your eyes makes Bamford Organic?

MG: We commission and design goods to be made from artisans, rural communities and small family firms. We keep alive precious traditional crafts and skills. The collection is produced out of respect and concern for the environment. Our goods have intrinsic worth and enduring value.

LF: And Bamford has a men's collection called Bamford and Sons as well. How hard is it to make structured menswear organic?

MG: The entire collection is made out of the utmost concern for the environment. Bamford and Sons has a division of the line which is solely organic and made from organic cotton and eco-friendly fabrics. The general design revolves around Sir Anthony Bamford's love of historic card as well as the modern British Classics. If a designer uses quality organic materials it is possible to achieve the feel and fit that they desire.

LF: Can you explain how some of the labor is outsourced since all is not produced on the farm itself?

MG: In India we work with the Lady Bamford Charitable Organization and have created two model villages. They are in phasal development but will benefit from the modern amenities of sanitation, healthcare, schooling and hospitals. Using our Khadi cotton widowed women who need to support their family are taught how to embroider and produce. This gives them confidence in their daily lives as well as the ability to pass on their skills to their children and community.

LF: What type of technology do you implement in creating the clothes?

MG: For prints, we use embroidery. The threads become the pattern. Using appliquéd gauze, silk embroidery thread and silk tulle the pattern for this spring embraces the beauty of blossoms in a more pure and modern way by trailing lines in almost a necklace fashion down the pieces. The cut work enhances the floral idea... with strips of taffeta sewn together and hand-cut to create layer-worthy brooches and necklaces that were made by hand in London.

LF: Now with the emergence of the accessories, home goods, spa and bath and body products a consumer could logistically live a completely Bamford lifestyle.

MG: Bamford products are an expression of a lifestyle. We deal in quiet luxury and believe passionately that organic and natural products are better for us. Our bodies are delicate and we need to treat them with care. We are so pleased to be stocked in stores like Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Markus who support our vision.

LF: What do designers need to bring, provide when approaching a manufacturer such as yourselves?

AA: The more that a designer can bring to the table the less room for confusion and error. Patterns, a sew by sample, and finished specifications make the transition much easier.

LF: When are your busiest periods?

AA: This year, we have been busy for the entire year. Because our line is fairly broad, we constantly have product to focus on. The beginning of the year we will focus on spring and summer items while mid year we will turn our attention to fall and winter. We work more towards inventory composition than direct order delivery. We produce over 16,000 sku's in our Los Angeles facility so there is always something to keep us busy.

LF: Are you selective in terms of the types of fabrics you work with?

AA: On the whole, we tend to work with a lot of cotton-based fabrics for our basic T-shirts, sweatshirts, underwear, et cetera. However with our retail-exclusive styles we are able to go outside the norm. Sometimes we have an idea for a garment that requires a certain fabric, and other times we will find a fantastic fabric first and design with that fabric in mind. Over all we are working with very functional fabrics that you can wash and dry. Nothing too high-end, or dry clean only.

LF: Have you had any cases whereby selected fabrics (from designers) have not been able to work with specific designs? If so can you give an example of this?

AA: Black Vinyl! We had purchased a black vinyl fabric that was intended for leggings and a mini skirt, but the fabric did not have enough stretch, so we turned it into a bag which works perfectly.

LF: What type of dyes do you use? How do you decide what colors to make per season?

AA: Reactive Dye. We choose colors based on the product, and since we do not follow the standard seasonal color palette that the rest of the industry follows, we are able to choose a few colors and test them, and change them as we see fit.

LF: Do you do any sort of trend tracking?

AA: At American Apparel we lean towards hiring inside of our demographic so in most cases our trend information comes directly from our employees. We also have multiple designers who have their own style that they display in their designs. On top of that we have employees from all of our store's sending ideas and comments that they may have.

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LF: How have you adapted to the change of technologies being introduced, such as CAD?

AA: If you consider PAD SYSTEM a CAD tool, then the answer is yes. We use a software tool called, PAD. PAD assists us in digital patterns for samples and final patterns for production. We also create technical flats in Illustrator to compose digital line drawings of each style as a blue print for our technical packages.

LF: What would you say are key reasons as to why a designer should source a local manufacturer as opposed to an overseas one such as China?

AA: Visibility and delivery. Unless the designer is ready to travel to the Far East in order to insure that their concept is intact once it begins manufacturing, there will always be that uncertainty as to the fit and quality of the product. Too, capacity issues will affect delivery. In most cases, many companies are competing for the capacity that outsourcing has to offer. Companies with larger volume will normally win the capacity war, while smaller volume companies find it difficult to realize the savings that they believe outsourcing has to offer. On the other hand, there are still smaller contract apparel companies in the U.S. that do great work and stand behind product and delivery.

AA Continued: While the upfront costs may be higher than an off shore quote, the full cost may be equal or even less when considering logistics, time, delivery and assurance of quality and design reproduction. The designer can also more insure that their finished product is not the result of the exploitation of a fellow human being.

LF: What environmental principles do you follow?

AA: Do the right thing! We are constantly working to see that our work is not having an adverse effect on the environment. We work to recycle as much as possible, from fabric to paper to plastic. We work to create as much of our own energy as possible through solar regeneration. And, we are exploring other areas in fuel and fuel oils to operate our company and fleet friendlier. At the same time we are expanding our organic product line that features 100% organic cotton tops and bottoms both, natural and dyed. Too, we are exploring other natural fibers to enhance the line even further. www.americanapparel.net