

Fashion sense

B&B Leisurewear hopes to make its entire range Fairtrade and organic next year and says it has always put ethics at the heart of its business. We spoke to the company about fashion, Fairtrade and fabrics

“We have always been ethical, right from the beginning, and before it was fashionable to be so,” claims B&B Leisurewear (BBL) md Ranjeet Khara. “We’ve only ever used two factories, one in India and one in Turkey, and we actually started doing organic cotton in 2005/2006, it just wasn’t accredited or that well known then.”

The company currently stocks several organic and Fairtrade styles, although hopes this will extend to the entire range by 2009, and claims it is the only printwear company to hold accreditation from both the Soil Association and the Fairtrade Licensing Organisation (FLO).

“Our organic cotton from India is not

organic in conversion, as we believe this is still too much of a grey area,” states Khara. “We are also in the process of importing the organic fabric to our factory in Turkey so the organic products can be made there too.”

Khara believes that organic is here to stay and hopes that the pressure for companies to have ethical practices will also continue. However, he also believes there is still some confusion out there around some of the terms. “People are using the term fairly traded, which is different to a Fairtrade licensed product,” he explains. “It took us six months to get the Fairtrade accreditation and we want to be very open about which products do and don’t have it.”

Regardless of which are Fairtrade, all have one thing in common and that is their fashion edge, says Khara, who has helped transform the 25-year-old family business into a more fashionable brand – a direction many companies are now going in, he says. “Going back seven or eight years, we were among only a few companies doing fashion T-shirts. But now the whole tone of the industry has changed and is very fashion/retail led,” he explains. “This is filtering into all areas now, and is evident from the brands’ catalogues and on location photo shoots.”

To help it keep its finger on the fashion pulse, every year BBL takes a fashion student from Derbyshire University on a paid placement. The student carries out trend research, then BBL looks at ways to incorporate the trends into its collection. “We go to fashion shows as well, but back it all up with this trend research,” says Khara.

But the company has found that it cannot push the fashion boundaries too far, too fast or it risks alienating its customers, as Khara explains: “We have actually had to step back a little with the fashion ranges in the past, as customer feedback told us that you can’t go too far forward in the fashion sense – you can’t peak too soon.” With this in mind, BBL has a ‘classic’ range, which it carries every year, then its



‘fast fashion’ ranges, which change year in, year out.

The garments themselves are imported from Turkey and India, but the roots of the business are here in the UK, where it used to manufacture T-shirts from Derbyshire. Today there is still a trace of that manufacturing, with the panel service BBL offers those customers that need it. “We cut the panels here, send them off to be printed, then they come back to us to be manufactured and labelled,” explains Khara. “About 5-10% of our customers use this service and we are proud of the fact that we’ve still got this manufacturing element in the UK.”

BBL also offers a totally bespoke service (i.e. not a variation on a stock garment) and sees this side of the business as key to its growth. “The bespoke side is really growing at the moment, across the whole industry, and it is this design element which we are really trying to push,” explains Khara. “We are very much more than just a big stockholder of blank garments.”

The bespoke service is mostly used by retailers that have their own brands, though BBL doesn’t sell to them direct. Retail accounts for about half of the business and the requirements here are quite specific, says Khara. The other half is made up of promotional work, “more your basic T-shirts” and the company does a lot of work for the music industry on an ad hoc basis.

Looking to the future, BBL is currently doing a lot of research into the technical side of fabrics. It sees ethics and organics continuing to shape the industry, but also predicts that recyclable and recycled fabrics will start making an appearance. The current trend for longer lengths and lighter fabrics will also continue, suggests Khara. “Shape will also be important next year – everyone’s trying to get the right length, fit and shape retention,” he says.

He adds: “Our Indian factory is very technically advanced and is currently looking at a fabric to benefit eczema sufferers – so one day we could see the ‘healing T-shirt’.”

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