

Example of  
sustainability  
practices in the shoe  
industry are they  
effective resea...

[Business](#), [Company](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Introduction](#) \n \t
2. [Shoe Industry and Sustainability Issues](#) \n \t
3. [Nike Sustainability Practices](#) \n \t
4. [Adidas Sustainability Practices](#) \n \t
5. [Timberland Sustainability Practices](#) \n \t
6. [Sustainability Practices - Issues in the Shoe industry](#) \n \t
7. [Conclusion](#) \n \t
8. [Work Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

## **Introduction**

The shoe industry is known to be one of the non-environmental friendly industry segments. The use of hazardous raw materials and chemicals while manufacturing shoes, especially the use of highly toxic element chromium, adhesives, toxic solvents and non-renewable synthetic materials can do serious damage to the environment and human health. Apart from, a large amount of water is used to manufacture the materials like leather, fabrics and synthetic petrochemicals (Grahame 2014). Therefore, it is very important for the shoe companies to practice sustainability. In recent times, a trend of environmental consciousness has engulfed the shoe companies. Most of the big shoe brands claim of practicing sustainability in its business. It is important to take a look at whether the claims made by the shoe companies are actually real or complete hogwash. The three pillars of

sustainability are Social, Economic and Environmental. When a company claims to be employing sustainable practices, it should follow policies to improve all these three areas. This essay will critically discuss the claims of the various shoe industry players and then based on their acts and evidence will try to prove whether they are really taking sustainable steps or just “greenwashing”.

## **Shoe Industry and Sustainability Issues**

The shoe industry has a huge challenge when it comes to sustainability issues. Every step of the shoe manufacturing, sales and even the recycling process of the shoe industry creates environmental unfriendly products. The leather tanning process uses harmful chemicals and glues that contain toluene and benzene, which are dangerous for the environment. The modern day trainer shoes contain a combination of leather, rubber, textile, foam and metal, which are not easily separable (Grahame 2014). All these go together in landfill and some of those are not easily biodegradable, leading to pollution.

Many countries like the USA and the European Union have created strict sustainability guidelines for shoe manufacturers. Also, many shoe makers are taking an array of sustainability steps. Most of the shoe makers claim that they are taking green measures to improve the environment around us and also create a sustainable business model. Below an analysis as regards the claims versus actual sustainable steps taken by some of the big players of the shoe industry is made.

## **Nike Sustainability Practices**

One of the four pillars on which the growth strategies of Nike are pinned on is sustainability. Nike claims that the principles of environmental sustainability form the core of its business model. It claims that for many years, its utmost focus has been to improve the working conditions of the factory workers who work on contracts, increasing productivity and decreasing the environmental footprint (Nike Inc. 2014). Several reports showcase the determination of Nike to manufacture sustainable products and improve the supply chain process to create less waste. Dr. Aarti Sharma (2013) reports that in order to reduce the environmental footprint, Nike has taken several measures such as recycling shoes, phasing out the use of sulfur hexafluoride, manufacturing the accessories of sports from waste and collaborating with different NGOs. Over the years, it has innovated various eco-friendly products and materials so as to limit the use of natural resources. For instance, in 2005, it launched a product line called 'Considered' that focuses on designing sustainable products. The Considered line uses materials that are found within 200 miles of the Nike factory so that the energy consumption for transportation can be reduced, leading to a diminished effect on the climate. In comparison with Nike's typical products, the manufacturing process of Considered reduces the use of solvent by over 80% (Business Today 2014). The leather used in making the Considered line of shoes comes from a tannery, which recycles wastewater to make sure that toxins do not affect the environment. The Considered line of shoes for men includes the Rock Shoe, the Considered Boot, the CVT, the Tiempo, the Mowabb II, and the Humara models (Business Today 2014). For Nike,

sustainability offers an "opportunity for innovation" (Nike Inc. 2014).

In 2012, Nike launched its first product manufactured by using "innovative new NIKE Flyknit technology and manufacturing process". In 2013, it has launched the Flyknit Lunar 1+ running shoe, which is capable of reducing footwear waste in the upper by 80% in comparison with the traditional production method. Compared to a traditional running shoe, the total combined material savings just from the uppers of the Flyknit Lunar 1+ has been 66,000kg since its introduction (Nike Inc. 2014). Nike designs its products in a way that the shoes can easily be transformed into material. Outsoles are manufactured in a way that they don't require adhesives or chemical glues.

Nike has set a goal for itself to reduce carbon footprint by 20% by 2015, and by the end of 2013, it has achieved a 13% reduction of carbon emissions per unit. In the manufacturing process, it has reduced carbon emissions by 17%, and in the inbound transportation; it has reduced carbon emissions by 29% from 2011 to 2013. It has improved water efficiency by 23% per unit and reduced waste production by 8.6% in footwear manufacturing from 2011 to 2013 (Cheeseman 2014). Nike diverts 85% of its footwear manufacturing waste from landfill or incineration by recycling and taking other environment-friendly measures. These achievements of Nike show that the company is right on its target of sustainability and that it does what it claims.

## **Adidas Sustainability Practices**

Adidas' vision is to stay committed to improving its environmental footprint across all its products, processes and services. It has identified 8 types of

environmental impact that happen in its value chain, and it aims at saving energy and reducing carbon emissions, saving water, reducing the use non-recyclable raw materials and increasing the use of environment-friendly materials, reducing waste and toxicity, and improving the environmental footprint of raw materials and products (Adidas 2014).

In order to act on its mission, Adidas has undertaken a variety of measures. It has changed the way it develops its product to reduce waste creation. It uses 95% organic fabric in creating the final products and the remaining 5% is recyclable. It also takes efforts to recycle old sport shoes that are usually discarded after they are worn out, leading to waste creation. Adidas wishing to mend this situation involves its customers in the initiative of “ Sustainable Footprint” to raise awareness about shoe recycling. In Brazil, for instance, it has collaborated with the RCR environmental waste company and placed recycling bins in more than 40 Adidas stores across the country, asking customers to give away their old shoes for recycling. Once these old shoes were collected, they were processed, grinded, tested and purified to be used again, thereby creating zero impact on the environment (Adam 2012).

### **Timberland Sustainability Practices**

Timberland has started a holistic sustainability movement. It claims to invest in the innovation of green products, sustainable manufacturing process, improved the lives of workers in the factories and engage communities in spreading sustainability goals beyond the company boundaries.

## **Sustainability Practices - Issues in the Shoe industry**

Although the shoe industry is one industry where almost all the big players have come together to create an environment of sustainable production, but like many other industries, there is more marketing around “green initiatives” than actually is implemented. For example, the Earth Shoe of Massachusetts has a green logo and claims to be “good for planet” and 100% lead free.

However, in practice, the Earth footwear contains almost 250 times more lead than permitted by the US shoe manufacturers in January, 2014 (Fashion United 2014). Also, another trend in the recent years is to design shoes made out of cotton instead of leather as cotton is easily recyclable posing less threat to the environment. It is true that the processing of cotton may not require all the hazardous chemicals that are required for leather tanning, but cotton recycling requires a huge amount of water and land area (Derrig and King 2010). In none of the sustainability reports published by companies like Nike, Adidas and others, the impact of excess water or land requirement is portrayed. These reports only publish the rosy picture without disclosing the whole truth.

Although Nike and Adidas have taken some really good steps to become sustainable, but some luxury footwear brands like Gap, Diesel and Armani that claim of sustainability being an integral part of their supply chain actually have taken no effort to reduce the use of hazardous chemicals in their manufacturing processes as reported by the Detox Catwalk Group (Fashion United 2014). Also, leading fashion brands like Puma, Nike, and Adidas have come together and taken a zero discharge of hazardous

materials from their operations by 2020, but there is no plan or management system to oversee the steps taken by these companies (Grahame 2014).

Many argue that this is only a ploy to create a green image without doing anything.

## **Conclusion**

The Shoe manufacturing and recycling processes are not very environment-friendly. The hazardous chemicals in the manufacturing process as well as the non-bio-degradable materials used in the production of shoes pose a problem for workers at plants and for people in the environment, economy and the society at large. Like many other industries, the shoe industry has also started sustainability initiatives. Nike, which was once known as a laggard when it came to sustainability practices in the supply chain, is now one of the leaders in that area. Big companies like Adidas, Puma, and Timberland are implementing a lot of initiatives to make the business process sustainable. However, still the claims seem to be more than the actual efforts taken. In fact, most of the luxury brands in the footwear industry still do not care about the environment and are only focused towards better quality and design. However, as the shoe industry has huge environmental impact, there are some sustainability initiatives taken by the industry giants. Hopefully, these will improve in the coming days.

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