



How Williams-Sonoma Set Sustainability Up to Succeed

By Christa Avampato, Contributing Writer | July 21, 2022

Developing a comprehensive sustainability program is a daunting task, and you can't expect it to bear fruit overnight.

Sustainability programs at **Williams-Sonoma, Inc.**, go back at least two decades. The \$8 billion, San Francisco-based company owns brands including Williams Sonoma, Pottery Barn, West Elm, Mark and Graham, and Rejuvenation.

West Elm, which had been sourcing Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified wood since 2002, launched a responsible materials initiative in 2008, and formed a team a year later. In 2014, **Jennifer Gootman**, Director of Social Consciousness & Innovation at West Elm, started the Fair Trade Factory Program, and the innovation work truly took off. That program was so successful that it had expanded across all brands by 2017, and established the foundation for an enterprise-wide approach and a center of excellence.

How to Build a Sustainable Sustainability Team

Today, Gootman is Head of Sustainability and Social Impact at Williams-Sonoma, Inc. and oversees the sustainability programs within all of the brands. She reports to the Executive VP of Global Sourcing and Supply Chain. Her global team manages a wide and deep set of



Jennifer Gootman, Head of Sustainability and Social Impact at Williams-Sonoma, Inc.

responsibilities, including communications, ESG (environmental, social, and governance) disclosures, and strategy.

Sustainability and Social Impact global team breakdown:

- One-third sit within the US factories and country offices;
- One-third are in the Singapore business hub, and manage vendor chain of custody, reporting, scheduling for ethical production audits, and implementation;
- One-third are embedded within the US businesses and set the strategy, engage with the brands, and handle ESG disclosures.

The breadth of Gootman’s team allows them to work across silos — a key to their success. The team members have a wide set of skillsets and backgrounds. Some have deep expertise sourcing textiles and woods. Others have niche skills closely aligned to business functions, including energy calculation and procurement, factory social compliance, and packaging.



This article is part of our [ongoing coverage](#) of sustainability issues. Thanks to [Planbox](#) for its support of this series.

Innovation and Sustainability Go Hand-in-Hand

In many companies, innovation teams are being asked to take responsibility for sustainability initiatives — or at least pitch in. Gootman explained that those with innovation experience have a lot to offer when it comes to sustainability work.

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“It’s about the long term,” said Gootman. “The work is very strategic, and innovation leaders understand how to secure the support from the C-suite and the board that’s needed at the enterprise level. They also understand the importance of employee engagement, and the groundswell of internal support that comes from employees across the company. Like



innovation work, so much of sustainability is about asking the right questions — not about having all the right answers — and collaborating with the core lines of business.”

Setting Audacious Goals

Innovation leaders are also used to setting audacious goals and creating the roadmaps to get there. Williams-Sonoma, Inc. has set the goal that 75 percent of their products should align with one or more social or environmental initiatives by the year 2030. In mid-2022, they’re halfway to that goal.

“By 2030, this will represent over \$1 billion in purchases from vendors every year,” said Gootman. “Responsible sourcing comes from organic cotton, fair trade, supporting local artisans, and low VOC [volatile organic compounds] products like **Greenguard** [meaning the product has met industry standards for low emissions].”

In addition to the sustainable sourcing goal, Williams-Sonoma, Inc. also has science-based targets, and intends to be the industry leader in climate goals. These exist across three levels:

- Scope 1 – the fuel a company burns
- Scope 2 – the energy a company purchases
- Scope 3 – the emissions from the value chain of raw materials that are used in production, sales, shipping to customers, and disposal.

Scope 3 is 98 percent of a company’s total footprint, and of that, materials and production account for almost 50 percent.


“Williams-Sonoma, Inc. is poised to lead the home retail industry when it comes to reducing climate impact, because of our design-centric model,” said Gootman. “Again, because we design our products and work directly with raw material suppliers, we have control and leverage over the Scope 3 footprint inputs — especially when it comes to materials and production.”

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Support and Resources for Sustainability Leaders

No sustainability leader needs to feel isolated. Resources and potential collaborators abound. **NYU’s Stern Center for Sustainable Business** and the **Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania** have created a vast amount of free, publicly-available content, events, and research data.

“Be specific about what you want to learn, and what information [will be] most helpful to your business,” said Gootman. “Like digital, sustainability is too broad a topic to create a one-size-fits-all approach for every business.”

 is also an advocate for looking outside a company’s industry for inspiration. Some of her favorite sources of inspiration are **The Business of Fashion**, **Sourcing Journal**, **Anthropocene Magazine**, and the **Futerra newsletter**.

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Photo by *Krystal Black* on *Unsplash*

Furniture from a collaboration between designer Sarah Sherman and Williams-Sonoma brands West Elm and Pottery Barn

