CCES 2025
Textiles & Apparel Track Session Summary

Exploring the Potential of Secondhand Apparel Wholesale

Every year, millions of sellable clothing items and accessories end up in landfills, despite their quality and potential value. Before we upcycle, transform, dismantle, or grind these textiles, we must prioritize extending their life in their original state. This breakout session will explore the untapped opportunities in secondhand apparel wholesale and its role within the circular textile model.

Speakers

- **Myriam Laroche**, Collective Détour
- **Mariouche Gagné**, Harricana
- **Cédric Comte**, Le Ninety
- **Bev Kobe**, Goodwill Industries - Ontario Great Lakes

April 16, 2025, Montreal, Canada

SUMMARY

Introduction

The panel discussion featured Myriam Laroche of Collective Détour, Mariouche Gagné of Harricana, Cédric Comte of Le Ninety, and Beverly Kobe of Goodwill Industries Ontario Great Lakes. The discussion highlighted the growing importance of second-hand wholesale in the circular economy, outlining its potential, challenges, and the critical role of various stakeholders.

Myriam Laroche, co-founder of Collective Détour, introduced the panel by emphasizing her 30 years in the fashion industry and her transition towards sustainable practices after witnessing the unsustainable demands of fast fashion. Her agency, Collective Détour, now assists brands in adopting circular, resilient, and transparent production methods. Laroche stressed that her primary goal is to keep clothes in their initial state for as long as possible. She sees second-hand apparel wholesale as a way to support "first-life retailers" by enabling them to integrate pre-owned clothing into their assortments, thereby expanding the second-hand market and making it more accessible to consumers who might be hesitant to visit traditional thrift stores.

Laroche also addressed the challenges in second-hand wholesale, including a lack of data on clothing quality, the absence of standardized valuation methods for pre-owned garments, and infrastructure gaps in sorting facilities. She highlighted the complexity of managing fashion inventory, which is compounded by the unique nature of second-hand goods. A crucial point raised was the indispensable role of non-profit organizations, which have historically relied on second-hand clothing sales to fund their social missions. Laroche insisted on keeping these organizations in the loop and ensuring they share in the growth of the second-hand market. The economic impact of second-hand wholesale includes new revenue streams for both first-line retailers and non-profits. Socially, it creates job opportunities for expert sorters and specialized buyers, bridging the gap between the traditional fashion industry and the second-hand sector. Environmentally, it significantly reduces textile waste, water consumption, energy use, and raw material usage.

Mariouche Gagné, founder of Harricana

Mariouche Gagné, a pioneer in sorting, reselling, and transforming second-hand clothing through her brand Harricana, shared her journey from a fashion design contest winner to founding a company dedicated to upcycling. Inspired by the vast quantities of discarded furs, she focused her master's degree on recycled fur and launched Harricana in 1994, initially upcycling materials like fur, leather, and silk. Gagné described how she expanded her focus to include upcycled jeans and

wedding dresses, constantly seeking larger-scale impact. Her latest project aims to connect large retailers with sources of old garments, envisioning a future where second-hand clothing is as readily available in mainstream stores as organic produce in grocery stores. Her new space, currently under renovation, will also serve as an educational hub to inform consumers about sustainable purchasing choices.

Bev Kobe from Goodwill Industries Ontario Great Lakes

Bev Kobe from Goodwill Industries Ontario Great Lakes provided insights into the operations of a large non-profit social enterprise. Goodwill is the largest reseller and workforce development organization in North America, with 3,300 stores. Goodwill Industries Ontario Great Lakes alone processed over 65 million pounds of donations last year, repurposing an impressive 84.6% through resale and aftermarket solutions. Kobe explained Goodwill's reuse-first business model, where unsold items from their stores move to outlet stores, which serve as wholesale hubs for various buyers, from small business owners to online resellers. She noted the significant increase in textile donations, attributing it to fast fashion. Kobe highlighted a critical issue: a large percentage of textiles sold in bales overseas are not fully utilized, leading to environmental problems in recipient countries. Goodwill is now implementing advanced sorting to ensure higher utilization and traceability of goods. Beyond resale, Goodwill engages in B2B platforms, working with industries to repurpose deadstock and hard plastics into new products, such as decking and automotive insulation, aiming for significant landfill diversion. Kobe emphasized the need for technology and investment to automate these processes and collaborate with community partners to build sustainable solutions.

Cédric Comte, co-founder of Le Ninety

Cédric Comte, co-founder of Le Ninety, presented the perspective of a vintage retail store focused on customer experience. Le Ninety procures items from rag houses, which are large warehouses where clothes are graded before being exported. They wash and repair approximately 40,000 items annually, offering a curated selection of vintage clothing. Comte explained his motivation was to provide an alternative to fast fashion, allowing consumers to "vote with their wallets" by choosing second-hand. Le Ninety differentiates itself from traditional thrift stores by offering a bright, clean, and well-organized shopping environment with knowledgeable staff. Comte acknowledged the challenge of building their own supply chain—from sourcing and sorting to washing and repairing—simultaneously with developing their retail experience. He expressed excitement about the potential for wholesaling as a core mission for their business.

Costing Secondhand

The panel then delved into the costing of second-hand items. Cedric explained that Le Ninety pays a premium for "first pick" items from rag houses, around $10/pound. While they don't analyze every item individually, they have established cost estimates for prepping (washing and repairing), which contribute to their profit margins. Mariouche added that costing is complex, similar to new product development, but with unique considerations for prep work, and it varies significantly depending on the item's quality and category. The discussion also touched upon the relationship between wholesalers and non-profits. Bev from Goodwill emphasized that items that don't sell in retail stores can still be valuable, and encouraged partnerships with non-profits. Cedric explained that Le Ninety, by buying "rejects" from Goodwill and Renaissance, helps to prevent these items from ending up in landfills overseas, indirectly supporting the broader circular economy even if not directly through donations. Mariouche's project similarly aims to integrate non-profits by finding new avenues for their garments in large department stores, keeping the value within the local economy and making curated second-hand accessible.

The panelists discussed the misconception that curated vintage stores like Le Ninety compete with non-profits. Cedric clarified that their role is to safeguard and reintroduce items that might otherwise be discarded due to minor issues like soiling, as their customers are willing to pay for the cleaning and curation. A major concern raised was the high cost of managing second-hand items compared to selling new ones.

Mythbusting Feedstock Concerns

An audience member with experience in waste audits confirmed the vast amount of usable clothing in landfills in Ontario, emphasizing the need to extract and utilize this material. The fear of running out of second-hand clothing due to increasing retail interest was also addressed. Bev from Goodwill stated that while fast fashion does lead to a higher volume of lower-quality items, they price accordingly, and they don't foresee running out of donations. She also highlighted the potential for take-back programs with national brands, where Goodwill's existing infrastructure for collecting and sorting can be leveraged. The idea that retailers selling their own brands' second-hand items would eventually lead to donations to thrift stores was also discussed, reinforcing the circular nature.

Expertise in Sorting and Valuing

The importance of expertise in sorting and valuing second-hand garments was stressed. Myriam highlighted that individuals with a fashion background or "treasure hunters" can quickly identify valuable vintage items based on labels and manufacturing origins. Bev confirmed that Goodwill trains its staff on identifying brands and pricing items based on quality and brand recognition.

Secondhand Supply Chain

The discussion moved to the sheer volume of new clothing production. Myriam noted that global production had doubled from 50 billion units in 2000 to 100 billion in 2015, with projections of a 60% increase by 2030. This underscores the urgency of scaling second-hand solutions. The idea of retailers having dedicated second-hand sections for their own brands was explored, with panelists agreeing on its potential.

Cedric also touched upon the challenges of building a supply chain for second-hand clothing, describing it as a "nightmare" due to the lack of established roadmaps. He warned about the "danger of wholesaling" where buyers often don't know the exact contents of bales, leading to waste. He expressed pride that Le Ninety's meticulous selection process ensures they sell almost everything they acquire. Bev reiterated Goodwill's commitment to advanced sorting to ensure high utilization of their bales, acknowledging the time and cost involved.

Eric, an audience member from Renaissance Goodwill, raised a critical point about the broader implications of increasing units, whether new or reused. He stressed that while reuse is vital, the industry must also address the relentless increase in overall unit production to truly achieve circularity and prevent further environmental damage.

The panel concluded by discussing accessories and shoes, which are also handled by organizations like Goodwill, often through e-commerce or specialized markets. Finally, Mariouche shared exciting developments in technology, particularly AI-powered solutions for product photography and uploading, which can significantly reduce the cost and time involved in digitizing single second-hand items, making it more feasible for large retailers to integrate pre-loved products onto their websites. This technological advancement signals a promising future for scaling second-hand wholesale.