

# SNEAKERS WITH A GREEN SOUL



The Portland, Oregon-based apparel giant takes the carbon footprint of its shoes very seriously, from sourcing eco-rubber to monitoring its vendors. Jeremy Lehrer spoke with Lorrie Vogel, who runs the company's Considered Design program, about recycling shirts and sharing research.



**Lorrie Vogel**, General manager, Considered Design, Nike

By **Jeremy Lehrer**

**IF THE NIKES you're wearing are made of recycled materials glued together with low-VOC adhesives, you can thank Lorrie Vogel. As general manager of Nike's Considered Design program, Vogel is responsible for the company's sustainable practices. That has entailed everything from establishing green standards and reducing toxic materials to recycling T-shirts and developing software that makes it easier to design with a smaller (carbon) footprint. The company's internal sustainability efforts are focused around a scorecard that asks design teams to compete against one another while showing them their progress in various areas. The company has also created industry partnerships and crowd-**

**sourced creativity with online initiatives like the Environmental Apparel Design Tool and GreenXchange. Meanwhile, Nike is working toward manufacturing all its products in a closed-loop cycle. If that comes to pass, it will be a victory for the company (which had \$19 billion in revenue last year)—and the rest of us.**

## **What is Nike's vision of sustainability?**

Nike has been on a journey toward sustainability since the early '90s. We introduced our shoe-recycling program, Reuse-A-Shoe, back in 1990, and we began measuring our environmental footprint in 1998. We believe sustainability is core to Nike's growth and innovation. Nike's an innovation company, so we aren't just designing for today; we're designing for the future, when there are declining resources and increased demands. We need to create products in a completely new way.

Our goal is to take materials from an old shoe and an old shirt, grind them up, and turn them into a new shoe and a new shirt. What we call our North Star vision establishes the scope of what we'd like to achieve, and our Considered Design philosophy is focused on reducing our current environmental footprint. Considered is about creating the best-performance products for athletes but with a lower environmental footprint—less waste, less toxics, and more environmentally friendly materials. And sustainable innovation is central to that.

## **How do you accomplish that?**

Sustainability is a very complicated topic. You're focused on reducing waste, toxics, energy usage, water usage. Even figuring out what is the more sustainable material requires that you look at life-cycle analysis, look at the processes involved, vendor performance—all of those things. We've tried to make it easy for our designers to make good choices. To do that, we've created a teaching tool for them. At the moment they start to sketch a shoe or a shirt, we give them instant feedback on how they're doing in terms of categories like reducing waste or choosing environmentally preferred materials. We start the sustainability focus with our designers because they're the innovators in our company.

## **How does the instant feedback work?**

We've developed a system in which we score all of our materials and give them a number value. The higher the value, the more sustainable the material. This makes it easy for the designers to evaluate what they're doing. When the designers are choosing the specifics for the product, the design program will say, "This was a good choice, but, actually, there's a better choice." So we're educating them at the same time as they're designing.

## **How does this help you work toward your design goals?**

We've set targets for all of our teams. By



Nike's Lunar+ shoes are made according to Considered Design guides. The rubber has 96 percent less toxic materials than rubber made by standard methods.

fiscal year 2011, we wanted 100 percent of footwear products to meet Considered baseline targets—our way of evaluating a product's environmental impact. We wanted 100 percent of our apparel products to achieve that by 2015. We rate all of the products, and each category—basketball, running, football, etc.—gets a scorecard. The designers can use these scorecards to see how they're doing and to see the other groups are doing. And the different groups within Nike compete with each other, which is good. Each team is trying to figure out the more sustainable options. Because of that, they're constantly challenging us and coming up with innovative ideas.

#### What kinds of results have you seen?

When the team hit the targets for footwear, we saw a 19 percent reduction in waste across the board, and a 77 percent increase in the use of environmentally preferred materials. And we put these in metrics, so the designers can really understand the impact of their choices. We also improved efficiency in design, a reduction in waste that's equivalent to producing 15 million fewer pairs of shoes. In apparel, from last year to this year, we doubled our use of recycled polyester, which we make from discarded plastic bottles. That's the equivalent of taking 285 million plastic bottles out of landfills. So it's not just that the designers are making better choices; they're also seeing the impact of those

choices. And they get really excited that they've hit the targets.

**Nike has been pursuing a collaborative, wiki-style approach to sustainable research with projects like the GreenXchange, a site for sharing advances in materials and production technologies, and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, an industry initiative to set standards. But I can imagine that some companies would be resistant to sharing research. What are the benefits of collaboration?**

Green rubber, or what we call environmentally friendly rubber, which has a lower environmental impact, is a good example. We put the patent for that on GreenXchange, and a lot of companies became interested in using it. Many of them were outside of our industry, though, and as we started to share our research, we learned a huge amount from the bicycle industry and the car industry.

**GreenXchange isn't the most user-friendly from the perspective of interaction design. Are you working on developing a design that is more conducive to sharing?**

We're on a journey to figuring out the best form. The GreenXchange is a good start. We are always asking ourselves what's the most appropriate form for what we're doing, and there's a lot more that can happen in this space. It's like the internet—it wasn't that interesting at first. But the more that people create and share,

it gets much more interesting and much more useful.

**You've talked about making the entire supply chain more sustainable. How are you doing this?**

We consider Nike to be an innovation company, and we want everyone to be an innovation arm to us. Now that we have a score for each one of our materials, we're showing our vendors how we score their products and determine how sustainable they are. The vendors are working on our behalf to come up with more sustainable and innovative materials. The same thing is true with manufacturing. We set goals and parameters for each part of our overall supply chain that allow us to reduce our environmental impact.

**What are the industry obstacles to sustainability?**

From Nike's standpoint, we're trying to re-define the way we make things and move away barriers that prevent us from creating a closed-loop product. In regards to the industry, I'd like to see a lot of these barriers removed so it makes it easier to move toward our North Star vision. Our ideal vision is that we create the product in the most sustainable way, and then at its end of life, the product would be recycled. Nike would take those resources back into new products that we're creating. That is the issue we're trying to figure out—what's the best way to get those resources back in. •