

Environmental Stewardship in the Travel Goods Industry

By Sara Ecclesine

Carbon-neutral context

More than 2000 Hilton hotels recycle soap. “Why send something to a landfill that can actually save lives?” asked Maxime Verstraete, Hilton’s head of corporate responsibility. In partnership with Clean the World, Hilton has distributed nearly 7 million bars of recycled soap, a sliver of what they hope to achieve. Sending zero soap to landfills is part of Hilton’s ambitious 2030 sustainability vision, announced in May of 2018.

Hilton has long been an environmental leader in the hospitality industry. In the last 10 years, the company reduced energy and water use by 20% and cut carbon emissions and waste by 30%, resulting in over \$1 billion in savings. With their new Travel with Purpose campaign, Hilton increased their environmental commitment as part of their alliance with the International Tourism Partnership (ITP), an alliance of 30,000 member-hotels that brings together the world’s most powerful hotel chains. Working with the United Nations, the ITP has released “ITP Goals,” an ambitious plan to reduce carbon emissions by 66% by 2030 and 90% by 2050.

The ITP helped Hilton evaluate their progress based on the Paris

Climate Change Agreement, and set new goals to ensure they remain in compliance. By 2030, Hilton will reduce carbon emissions by 61%, reduce waste and water use by 50%, and sustainably source meat, poultry, produce, seafood and cotton. And, of course, Hilton will expand their existing soap recycling program to all hotels, until they achieve the goal of sending zero soap to the landfill.

The hospitality industry is hardly the only part of the travel industry falling in line with the Paris Climate Change Agreement. In October 2018, the aviation industry reaffirmed its commitment to carbon neutral growth at the Air Transport Action Group (ATAG) Global Sustainable Aviation Summit in Geneva. Ten years after agreeing to an ambitious joint strategy for reducing carbon emissions, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) – made up of 290 airlines representing 82% of global air traffic – announced that they were on track to achieve carbon neutral growth. IATA then launched a further 2050/minus 50 initiative, to reduce carbon emissions to 50% of 2005 levels by 2050.

October also marked the 13th annual Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference (ESTC), organized by The



International Ecotourism Society (TIES). TIES is a non-profit association consisting of over 750 organizations, such as national and state tourism boards, and companies ranging from tour guides to architects, forestry services and hotel groups. Like the ITP, the primary focus of the ESTC will be the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Given the context of ambitious sustainability goals set by the aviation, tourism and hospitality industries in concordance with the UN 2030 and 2050 targets and the Paris Climate Change Agreement, what is the travel goods industry doing to align themselves with the rest of the travel industry?

Product design and production

Travel goods manufacturers reduce waste in three key ways. Products can be designed around material that is recycled and sustainably produced. A design can feature collapsibility or compression, to lower a product’s dimen-

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sional weight. And careful factories can minimize waste material, as well as reuse and repurpose leftovers.

Sustainable and recycled material is extremely popular in the travel goods industry, especially among softside luggage and accessory manufacturers. Haiku is an example of one of the many companies who use fabric like cyclePET, made from 100% post-consumer recycled plastic beverage bottles. Smoots soles are constructed with recycled rubber, with renewable bamboo in the sock portion. United By Blue sourced a more unusual material, creating a bison supply chain with parts of the bison that are traditionally discarded. Eagle Creek Wayfinder bags are manufactured with Recycled PVB (RPVB), a stain- and water-resistant coating that starts its life as the film that makes windshields shatterproof. Hydaway and que bottle are popular examples of a product category that has serious green benefits: collapsible bottles replace hundreds of single-use plastic bottles and also save on shipping.

LiteGear has enthusiastically embraced recycled polyester fabric. “We’ve calculated that we have used over 1.5 million plastic bottles so far to make our fabric,” said LiteGear President and Creative Director Magi Raible. “We’re launching a campaign to reach five million bottles within the next three years.” But Raible believes that the use of recycled material, while admirable, is not the most environmentally impactful manufacturing strategy available to travel goods companies. “One of the top five if not top issues in our industry is freight. It’s a deal breaker in many cases,” Raible said. “Our products are designed to minimize the freight impact. You have to think about the number of pieces of luggage you can ship per gallon of gas.”

In order to reduce the carbon – and dollar – cost of shipping products across country, LiteGear specializes in products that smooch, collapse, fold and compress. It makes for a complicated calculus to design bags that fit variable underseat and overhead requirements, and also jigsaw in such a way to maximize the contents of a

carton or container. Hybrid bags that combine high density molded foam technology with soft-side front pocket panels ship exceptionally well. And LiteGear’s mixed collection of bags and accessories helps maximize shipping. The result of all that thoughtful design work is retailer loyalty. “I was in New England last week, and a top customer told me that LiteGear is an A-Z solution brand,” said Raible. “That feels good. It has to work for my consumers but it also has to work for my retailers.”

Like Raible, Tonia Rodrigues, designer and CEO at WALTER + RAY, is both founder and product visionary. In 2018, Rodrigues went through a green audit of all WALTER + RAY design and manufacturing processes. Her first goal was to decrease the weight of WALTER + RAY products. “We are looking into new durable fabric options for our bags that are lighter weight,” reports Rodrigues. “This will help reduce bodily stress and help conserve airline fuel consumption.” The second goal was to design around available eco-conscious fabrics, as long as they can meet weight and durability requirements. “If they can pass the rough and tumble that happens with traveling by plane, train and auto, it is on our cutting table,” said Rodrigues. The third ambitious goal is to give used bags a second life. Rodrigues is setting up a re-use project that will collect, refurbish and send bags to communities in need.

Using recycled material can be difficult or impossible depending on the margin structure of a business. It is especially challenging for private-label manufacturers, who produce bags that are destined to be giveaways (a particularly price-driven category), or need to build in more margin for their clients. Justice Le, senior creative director and product designer for AfterGen, explains “We have to cater to what the audience wants, and recycled material costs us four times more than what the client wants.” So AfterGen has looked for different ways to reduce waste. “To minimize material waste we lay it on markers as tight as possible,” Le said. “We’re always asking ourselves how can we pattern cut to use the least fabric, or find ways to reuse or recycle leftover material? As a manufacturer, we find other ways to waste as little material as possible so it doesn’t go into a landfill.”

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Using recycled material in hardshell luggage can be problematic because recycled materials generally aren't as strong as virgin materials. Harry Sheikh, CEO of HONTUS Milano Group, is working with product developers in China on new materials that are both 100% recycled and match the strength of virgin polymers. "That is just amazing if we can get it done," enthused Sheikh, "and we're very close to getting it done. This would create a significant impact on the greening of the industry, because luggage is now 55% hardside. When I started in the industry it was 3%." Sheikh has an additional vision. "If the industry can come together and create one uniform statement that says once this luggage is used and abused you can recycle this here, we could go a long way towards controlling the lifecycle of luggage, and reducing waste."

While many companies are working within the existing paradigm of hardshell luggage and recycled fabric softside luggage, a few manufacturers have embraced aluminum. One relative newcomer to the luggage business (but not the aluminum business) is Carol Elms, founder and CEO of Aleon. In her previous life Elms led BC Aviation supply, refurbishing and creating parts for airplanes. After taking a break to start a family, Elms was inspired to start an aluminum luggage company, working with one of the factories which used to create her FAA-compliant airplane parts. Her motivation was both practical and aesthetic. "I'm kind of a tomboy so I like things clean and simple," said Elms. "When I started the aluminum luggage business, there was only one brand with a very high price tag on the market. That's the reason I created a product with an affordable price. My aluminum luggage is beautiful and the majority of people can afford it." Aluminum lasts longer than plastic luggage, and at the end of its lifecycle it can be recycled. Aluminum luggage also follows a larger sustainability trend to substitute metal or wood for plastic.

Packaging and shipping

Most people in the travel goods industry know John Vermilye as the TSA standards guy. Since Travel Sentry was founded in 2003, the company has set



Suppliers can reduce the carbon cost of each travel accessory or piece of luggage through product and packaging design and shipping practices that minimize both dimensional and actual weight.



Careful production planning can minimize waste: pattern cutting to use the least amount of fabric and laying it on markers as tight as possible. Justice Le, senior creative director and product designer for AfterGen explains, "as a manufacturer, we find ways to waste as little material as possible so it doesn't go into a landfill."

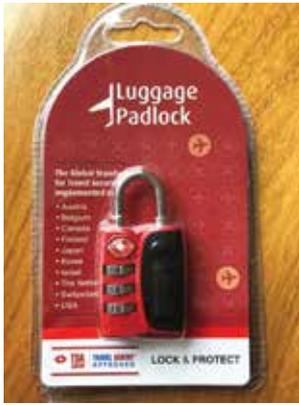
standards for lock and luggage manufacturers and now works with 600 airports across 25 countries. Besides his work with aviation security compliance, John Vermilye is passionate about the environment. Vermilye is co-founder of the Gallifrey Foundation, a marine-protection NGO that supports existing organizations. Vermilye's interest in finding and scaling up environmental solutions has bled over into his day job. Travel Sentry orders a handful of packaged locks each year to give away at tradeshow, or to send to consumers who have had locks damaged by airport security.

Over the last few years Vermilye and Travel Sentry CEO Florent Perrichon have looked for better packaging solutions for their small production run of locks. They originally started with a

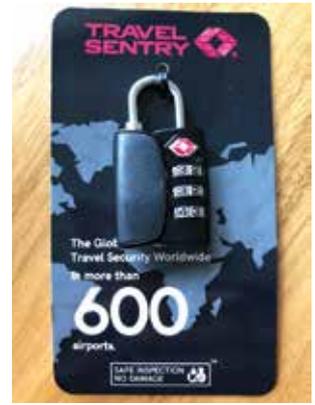
2-piece standard clamshell blister pack, at a cost of between \$.25 and \$.75 cents each, a packaging weight of 32 grams, and a carbon cost of 80 grams of CO². They next went to a face seal blister pack (with a cost of \$.20 and \$.40 cents each, packaging weight of 11 grams, and a carbon cost of 20 grams of CO²) and finally arrived at a cardboard hangtag without a plastic window (with a cost of \$.10 and \$.25 cents each, packaging weight of 7.5 grams, and a carbon cost of 15 grams of CO²).

Encouraged by their experiment, which resulted in packaging with lower carbon cost that is cheaper to produce and ship, Vermilye is hoping to scale up his company's solutions to the rest of the travel industry by encouraging other manufacturers to rethink their packaging.

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Travel Sentry originally started with a 2-piece standard clamshell blister pack, which cost \$.25-\$.75, weighed 32 grams, and had a carbon cost of 80 grams of CO². They next went to a face seal blister pack (\$.20-\$.40, weight 11 grams, 20 grams of CO²) and finally arrived at a cardboard hangtag without a plastic window (\$.10-\$.25 cents, weight of 7.5 grams, 15 grams of CO²).



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ing. As someone who has a big picture window into luggage manufacturing across 25 countries, Vermilye also would like to see U.S. manufacturers get ahead of the trend to ban or restrict PVC (countries that ban or restrict PVC include Sweden, Spain, Germany, Canada and South Korea) and also embrace the collapsible luggage trend that is so popular in Japan (collapsible luggage results in lower CO² emissions during shipping, because it has a lower dimensional weight per piece).

One Travel Sentry client and lock manufacturer who shares Vermilye's progressive approach to packaging is Hampton Products, makers of Brinks Padlocks (among other brands). Randy Voss, senior director of marketing for portable security, explained his philosophy: "Every piece of product I make is metal and comes out of a process that is dirty and hasn't changed much in decades. It's bad mojo. When we have the chance to do something in a positive way we do it." Hampton switched to Natralock Packaging ten years ago, working with Dunwiddie custom packaging. Natralock offers a fully sealed alternative to a traditional clamshell design that reduces the amount of plastic used by up to 80%, is 100% traceable, and is made with recycled paperboard. Finding green solutions is part of the DNA of Hampton Products, rather than being market driven. "Every three years our customers discover sustainability as a corporate initiative," Voss said. "We just keep going."

In the travel goods industry, the company best known for packable designs that are efficient to ship is Matador. This year the packable adventure gear manufacturer decided to tackle a complete packaging redo. "The most obvious route was to use the box

packaging we already have in place," said founder Chris Clearman, "but we took a step back and rethought the project from the ground up to make everything more efficient and reduce overall waste." Matador is in the process of switching to new bag packaging, which uses eight times less total packaging material by weight. They'll save around 70% of the cost of the packaging itself, and will be able to pack the products around 40-50% tighter with bags versus boxes. Clearman also believes the bags are a big merchandising improvement over hang tags, and are much better silent salesmen than their current packaging.

Green offices and activities

Beyond production and shipping, many companies in the travel goods industry create energy-efficient offices or implement environmental initiatives. LiteGear is an example of a company whose corporate culture is deeply green. "Our office team spent hours picking up waste along the marshlands on Mare Island (where the LiteGear office and warehouse are located) on International Coastal Cleanup Day a couple of weeks ago," said Raible. In addition, LiteGear has an extensive recycling program at the office, filters water in-house to avoid using more plastic bottles or paying for diesel-spewing trucks to deliver water, and minimizes the use of paper wherever they can.

Eagle Creek has one of the original and longest-running service programs in the travel goods industry. Their employee-led volunteer initiatives partner with non-profit organizations and government offices to provide hands-on support during company-wide volun-

teer days. Although Eagle Creek works with a variety of entities, most – like the California State Parks – are environmentally focused. United By Blue, the 2018 TGA Community Service Award winner, is essentially a waterway cleanup company that began selling t-shirts to fund its operations, and has grown into a mid-size manufacturing and retail operation with no loss of focus. For every product sold, United By Blue removes one pound of trash from oceans and waterways, and is now at 1,108,117 lbs and counting.

Another well-known example of a travel goods company with a green culture is Pacsafe. The Pacsafe Turtle Fund was the winner of the 2017 TGA Community Service Award. In line with their business model to reduce the number of single-use plastic bottles going to landfills, que Bottle also partners with environmental nonprofits, designing limited edition bottles and donating \$5 per bottle to the non-profit. Recipients include the Coral Reef Alliance, the Grand Canyon Trust, and the Rainforest Trust.

Is it time for our own 2030 plan?

With the knowledge and enthusiasm already present in this industry, we can do more. Can we set standards and create metrics for greenhouse gas emissions for our manufacturers and retailers? Can we support industry-affiliated environmental activity to amplify its impact? Can we coordinate a luggage collection and recycling program? To stay relevant and match the resolutions and achievements of the rest of the travel industry, let's chart a path for our industry to contribute to Paris Climate Agreement 2030 and 2050 goals. ■