UniformReuse.co.uk Case Study

Wilcox

Key Facts

- Wilcox are the largest textile producer/reclaimer in the UK, collecting around 500,000kgs per week.
- Wilcox use a three stage sort process to determine the best end use for each garment.
- Clothes are selected for quality and resold either in the UK or in foreign (typically African) markets
- Any clothes not suitable for reuse as is are used for wipers, or else recycled to produce fibres for use in different products

Background

Jmp Wilcox & Co Ltd and Wilcox Industrial supply Co are two companies collectively known as Wilcox Textile Reclaimers, a family owned group, established since 1895, involved in the reclamation, processing and export of fine quality clothing to Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia.

They are the largest textile producer / reclaimer in the UK and work closely with charities, local authorities and waste reclamation companies. Challenging old ideas and practices, Wilcox have developed new systems in the fields of collection, sorting, marketing and distribution.

The four acre manufacturing unit provides full transport facilities for their national collection system, being conveniently positioned in the West Midlands within easy access to the M5 and M6 motorways, Birmingham airport and rail Links.

Wilcox handle textiles arriving from numerous different sources including textile banks, waste sites; councils; household waste recycling centres; charities; and bulk collections. As a business, 'further down the line' they buy from Wales, South East England, they are the largest collector from three of the supermarket chains, also six national charities. A typical week can vary in quantities processed, the week of interview they sorted 660 tonnes, of which 10%, around 60 tonnes, was shoes. Approximately 7 tonnes of cuddly toys come through their plant every week; these toys are given away to their customers in East and West Africa by being put into the containers for shipment. These toys can not be re-distributed in the UK, as they do not know where they came from, and if they did want to pass them on, even to charities then the toys would have to be laundered, incurring cost.

Initiatives

Wilcox use a three sort process for garment reuse: first; second; fine. Anything outside of this is considered for their wiper making facility.

Stage 1 – First Sort:
They use a raised level sorting system, developed in Belgium. This involves a series of modular units in which 4 sorters work. In this first 'visual recognition' stage, each sorter has 150kg of textiles (still bagged) at a time to sort. At this stage they are sorted into different types of garment, there are 24 shoots in the middle, with a further 20 behind each operative, so that the sorted garments to go down into trolleys waiting below. As Wilcox is a 're-user' the sort is dictated by garment type, such as: slips; children's blouses; light polyester blouses; skirts; children's cotton rummage etc. They use a computerised system to monitor what is being sorted, by whom. Their computerised system allows them to analyse the type of items that are coming through, and where they are coming from. This makes the process of supplying the items to their customers more efficient, as they send through a 'packing list' of the items they want, and due to the expense involved in transit to Africa or wherever the customer is based, then it is critical that they ship the correct items a customer requirest.

Stage 2 – Second Sort:
At this stage the sorters look at specific types of garment for any damage: buttons missing; zips broken; wear and tear etc. For any wool based items that are suitable for reuse in the carpet industry, the goods are sent to India and Pakistan where they have to be re-yarned, the items have to be mutilated/shredded at Wilcox to protect the national infrastructure of the destination countries. Currently they ship free of charge as the material has no value, this approach is preferable to these goods going into landfill.

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Stage 3 – Fine Sort:
The destination of these items is mainly Eastern Europe, some also come back into the UK market.

A typical problem area for many reprocessors is the separation of shoes before arrival, leaving a high proportion of odds. Wilcox have organised sending these odds to Panipat in India, where people work in an enormous sorting facility best matching odd shoes. Again these items are sent free of charge, as there is no value in them.

For all items that can not go for reuse (clothing that was damaged or too worn; where buttons are missing, or zips broken; rips; some heavily branded corporate clothing) where possible these are cut down for wipers. Initially these were utilised by an oil company who wanted to buy material wipes though now approximately 55 tonne or 10% of their weekly processing goes into wipers. They have operators within an area of the plant focussed on 'trimming wipers', the different types of fabric are preferred for particular end uses. Fabric types are: t-shirt; sweatshirt; denim; terry; white cotton; winceyette, all of which are cut different ways for different purposes and various industries, for example: oil; paper; automotive; polishing in the jewellery trade; large homeware stores

Wilcox has been dealing with African companies for over 30 years. When they were first approached by an African buyer it was to purchase waste woollen fabrics from which to 'draw fibres' or 'shade' items for use in carpets. As a spin off from this, Wilcox asked the buyer if there would be a market if they supplied second hand clothing to Africa. In 2008, in Kenya alone there are between 17-30 'shops' that have the Wilcox name.

Due to the fact that others use the name it has an established reputation for quality, they have to send out goods with the Wilcox logo clearly visible. They have set up a scheme, where sorters from African countries can come for a period of up to nine weeks, in place as a quality control element for the customer.

Barriers to Recovery

In terms of corporate wear garments, there is the obvious problem that wherever in the world, people do not want to be seen to be wearing the same items, especially when items are heavily branded. Wilcox iterates that items that have discreet or easily removable branding are far simpler to put into the secondary markets. This could be as simple as the use of tax-tabs rather than embroidery. Incorporate Wear prefer to tax tab garments, and by being more aware of the recycling/reuse process will enable the designer to present a clearer value-judgement argument, increasing a garment's capacity to be reused.

The fabrics being used can also create problems, as polyesters and acrylics are difficult to reuse/recycle. Fleece material is not such a significant issue and t-shirts are fairly straightforward to use. When fabrics are heavily logoed through print, it presents difficulty even for wipers. For polyester/cotton mixes the higher the proportion of cotton the better.

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Efficient baling of reused garments has been strongly evaluated by Wilcox, and in order to get maximum capacity into their standard sized bales, which fit into large shipping containers, they have invested in some very high tech hardware. They have recently spent £320,000 on an automated baling machine, which is the fastest of its type in the world, and has the capacity to create 900 bales per day. It is fed with the sorted garments/items, which are fed into a compressor; this package is bagged then taped.

Additional Information

Websites

Wilcox **www.jmpwilcox.co.uk**

For contact information please search the Directory on www.uniformreuse.co.uk/directory