

Before you start talking to your suppliers

Talking to your suppliers is an important milestone in your journey to sustainable sourcing, and there are a few steps to take before you make first contact.

1. Understanding your sourcing aims and approach

Sourcing sustainable cotton can be as simple as finding the right swatch at a fabric fair and placing an order. Or, it can involve working with your suppliers to create a new supply chain that meets your particular sustainability needs.

Before you start your search for sustainable cotton, a good understanding of your business' sourcing aims – what kind of cotton do you want, how much and by when – will allow you to be more strategic in your approach. We typically recommend taking a portfolio approach; there is rarely a 'one size fits all' solution. By sourcing different kinds of more sustainable cotton, you will to meet your priorities and progress towards your targets more efficiently.

First, do you know what percentage of sustainable cotton you want to source and by when? For example, does your business have specific targets for different departments, brands or for the parent company? If you don't have targets yet, now is the time to set them out.

And second, are there any suppliers or perennial product lines that could switch to or use large volumes of sustainable cotton? These are often a good place to start.

2. Determining where to start

Although more sustainable cotton comes in many different shapes and sizes, it is split into two categories. Before you start talking to your suppliers, you should know which type you want to source, or whether you're happy with a mix (our recommended approach).

1. Quality Specific Cotton:

Find the right quality for your products: Quality specific cotton is traced along its whole supply chain. Organic cotton is classed as quality specific cotton, and it means you can trace the fibre from the farm/facility to the end product. Buyers tend to choose a quality that aligns with their product specifications and to purchase directly from the supply chain.

Use: Because quality specific cotton is segregated from non-sustainable cotton throughout the supply chain, it's easy to integrate into your current system. Making on-product claims for this type of cotton is also easy, because the actual cotton exists in the end product.

Certify: Using this type of cotton requires due diligence and certification. Scope certificates confirm a unit is approved to sell the fibres, transaction certificates travel with the cotton along its supply chain, and a final certificate is passed from the mill to the Cut, Make and Trim facility.

2. Mass Balance Cotton:

Mass balance cotton comes from systems like BCI or CmiA. Programmes using mass balance do not require sustainable and non-sustainable cotton to be segregated in the supply chain. This means you can source the same cotton as normal, while also investing in more sustainable cotton farming. By supporting these programmes, your business is increasing the global supply of more sustainable cotton.

Programmes for mass balance cotton require membership, and we explain the typical steps below. Your sustainable sourcing goals will help you choose the right programme for your needs.

Understand your cotton baseline: Start by establishing how much cotton – in tons – your business uses. Each mass balance scheme has its own calculator for you to use. For all of them, you'll need a year's worth of your production data (the last calendar year), grouped by a) product type (e.g. men's shirts, bedlinen) and b) fibre content (e.g. % amount of cotton content in a garment). You will use this total tonnage figure to work out your programme membership fee.

N.B. It's worth checking if this step has already been conducted within your organisation.

Identify your top suppliers: Once you've joined a mass balance cotton programme, the next step is to identify the biggest actors in your supply chain. This could include agents, supply routes, mills or even spinners, depending on your supply chain visibility. These actors will be key partners in achieving your sustainable sourcing goals.

Determine priority suppliers: From these key suppliers, select a shortlist of those that are both important and which you have a good relationship with and/or strong influence over (i.e. your business volume or brand name is valuable to them). Start with these suppliers; they will tend to be keener to assist with your sourcing priorities!

Check relevant supplier lists: With your suppliers organised in this way, check with the different membership bodies to see if they are already listed in their programme. Some of these lists are freely available while others are only available after sign up. However, most bodies will help you determine who on your priority supplier list is already signed up with them. With this information, it's time to ask your suppliers to switch their cotton source for your product. Suppliers can start aligning your purchase orders with the requirements of mass balance chain of custody as required by the sustainability programme.

3. Setting your aspirations and determining your approach

It is important to set the right foundations as you start to source more sustainable cotton. For starters, ask yourself: who do I need to involve and what steps do we need to take next?

Identify key internal stakeholders

Every organisation is different, but - in general - the key people to involve at the start of your sustainable cotton sourcing journey include:

- Designers/Buyers/Fabric Buyers – Designers and buyers choose fabrics, so they're in the right place to search for sustainable fibre options for your products. If they understand the business targets and sustainability aims, they can make a huge difference to your sourcing success.
- Production/Sourcing – Production teams have links with the supply base and can advise who the best suppliers are to work with on sustainable cotton. For smaller brands that source mostly through agents, this might mean the need for service providers.
- Quality/QC – If there are decisions around changing qualities, involve your QC team early to engage them in the reasons behind the change and to ensure new qualities meet existing standards.
- Finance – You will need support from finance for any extra costs associated with sustainable sourcing.
- Marketing – This team is essential to help you understand when and how to communicate sustainable activities to the consumer.
- **Select chosen standard and set up membership**

Once you have chosen the right standard and approach for your organisation, ensure that all conditions for using the sustainable cotton are met. For example, that your membership is validated, or that the suppliers processing the cotton are able to do so in accordance with the requirements of the sustainability programme's chain of custody or other requirements.

Establish your capability to document purchasing of cotton-containing products

The ability to document your sustainable sourcing of cotton-containing products is essential if you want to demonstrate performance against internal targets. It is important to think carefully about which data or procedures you need as you set up any internal documentation system. Ensure that you know which suppliers your cotton-containing products are coming from – this will enable the due diligence required by the cotton options where you need certification. Some cotton options do not require certification, like the BCI programme, which has an online verification tool, the Better Cotton Platform, and would need to be integrated into your business process.

Check organisational systems for recording purchasing

Your organisation will probably already have a collection of systems to manage and record purchasing. It is worth thinking about if and how you can use these. For example, is it possible to enter sustainable cotton composition instead of a standard composition when running a report? There might also be opportunities to adapt and use existing tools. For example, some buying systems have modules that enable tracking.

If no existing systems seem useful, it is important you start working with your team and the relevant departments to figure out how purchases can be recorded.

Acquire access to a relevant industry tool for the sustainability standards and certification schemes

Acquire access to a relevant industry tool for the sustainability standards and certification schemes you decide to adopt (e.g. the Better Cotton Platform). There are useful industry tools to help with your sourcing and bespoke systems are an option. BCI Membership is obligatory for retailers and brands, and includes access to the Better Cotton Platform which documents the Better Cotton Chain of Custody as you source cotton-containing products as Better Cotton. It registers the 'Better Cotton Claim Units' (or BCCUs) credited to your account by your suppliers. Be aware that use of the Better Cotton Platform is governed by the Better Cotton Chain of Custody which requires membership for certain categories of your suppliers.

Many tools are accessed via membership of the various cotton organisations and are integral to their correct use within brands.