



By: TA | AP Insight

Fix it, don't ditch it – clothing brands encourage young customers to mend worn clothes



Encouraging customers to mend worn clothes **instead of buying** new ones might seem like a self-defeating sales strategy.

But in-store repairs and sewing workshops are becoming essential retail services for clothing brands as they try to appeal to young consumers who want to save money and the planet.

While luxury fashion houses and select specialty retailers like Patagonia have offered product repairs for decades, the concept has caught on.

Jeans giant Levi Strauss & Co., casual wear chain Uniqlo and budget retailer Primark are some of the apparel companies hoping to win over Generation Z shoppers with a needle and thread.

Levi's created a handstitching course for high school students after determining that many Gen Zers lacked the **sewing skills** to match their interest in thrift store shopping and sustainability.

Employees spend 90 minutes instructing teenagers on four tasks: sewing on a button, hemming, patching a hole and fixing a tear.

The Wear Longer program, which the San Francisco-based company is expanding across the U.S., builds on the repair and customization services Levi's offers at hundreds of stores worldwide.

"We think it's important to empower the people who buy our clothes with the skill sets to maintain them, to get them to that second life," Paul Dillinger, Levi's head of global design innovation, said.

Detroit resident Chloe Halprin, 25, is the kind of consumer retailers hope to attract with a **"fix it, don't ditch it"** message.

In high school, Halprin shopped at inexpensive, trendy stores. Fixing a big rip felt beyond her limited sewing ability. If she damaged a top or skirt from Forever 21, "I might just throw it away."

These days, Halprin buys most of her clothes secondhand. She recently learned to hem with a sewing machine and hopes to tackle projects like turning a skirt into a shirt.

"I try to be conscientious of my carbon footprint," Halprin, a nonprofit grant writer, said. "I really don't like waste. I'm trying to save money as well."

Mending is a tiny part of cutting the world's mountains of textile waste

The evolution of mending from an economic necessity and traditional craft to a method for cultivating customers didn't happen overnight.

The fashion industry as a whole has come under intensifying pressure to reduce its contributions to environmental pollution and climate change.

Textile waste — which includes manufacturing remnants, unwanted clothes and linens, and unsold products — is one of the industry's most pressing challenges.

Each year, the world generates fabric waste at a rate equivalent to a garbage truck's worth getting dumped or incinerated every second, the United Nations Environment Program estimates.

Researchers broadly agree that repairing and reselling clothes can reduce a garment's environmental impact, especially if it delays or replaces a new purchase.

But many caution the practices remain too limited to offset continued growth in clothing production and consumption.

Clothing production roughly doubled between 2000 and 2015

Clothing production roughly doubled between 2000 and 2015, while the average number of wearings per garment declined by about 36%,

according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

The sustainability nonprofit estimated that less than 1% of discarded clothing material got recycled into new apparel.

Enter Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012. It's the generation that grew up with fast fashion and e-commerce, then had school years and young adulthoods shaped by the coronavirus pandemic and post-pandemic inflation.

Whether due to limited budgets or a rejection of materialism, Gen Z has helped the preowned clothing market grow much faster than retail apparel sales in the U.S., independent market intelligence firm GlobalData estimated in a report with resale platform ThredUp.

For companies that make new clothes, mending programs and classes address "some deeper consumer needs and consumer behaviors at the moment," GlobalData retail analyst Neil Saunders said.

"It puts a halo on the brand," he said.

The environmental impact of retailer repairs is limited

The hands-on response from mass-market retailers, especially fast-fashion chains like Primark, Zara and H&M, has generated interest as well as skepticism.

Zara, which has its headquarters in Spain, launched a digital platform in 2022 for customers to resell their used pieces and to request basic alterations and repairs.

The program is available in 17 of the nearly 100 countries where the trend-driven retailer operates.

Ireland-based Primark has focused more on customer education. The value-focused retailer hosts free "Love It For Longer" events where customers are taught skills like

replacing zippers and buttons.

"Learning how to repair and care for clothing is probably one of the most simplest but absolutely totally effective ways that we can reduce waste and also extend the lifetime of whatever we buy," Vicki Swain, Primark's product longevity & partnership lead, said.

The company has held the workshops — more than 730 altogether — in nine of the 17 countries where Primark has stores, including the U.S. Primark also tested in-store repairs at three U.K. locations this year.

Swain argues that affordable clothes can be just as durable and repair-worthy as more expensive ones.

Half the items Primark sells annually are basics like socks, underwear, T-shirts, and jeans, she said.

"There is nothing throw away about our products," Swain said.

The fashion sector's primary source of impact is due to the overproduction of pieces and growing volumes of garments created - Kate Fletcher

Uniqlo, which focuses on wardrobe staples, offers a range of aftercare services, including repairs, decorative sashiko mending, embroidery and creative restyling.

Available in 75 of the Japanese mass-market retailer's roughly 2,500 stores, the services are promoted as a natural extension of product life cycles.

The program also strengthens Uniqlo's connection with customers, said Jean-Emmanuel Shein, director of global corporate responsibility at Uniqlo USA.

Kate Fletcher, a professor of sustainability, design and fashion systems at England's Manchester Metropolitan University, said she thinks popular retailers are well-meaning, but

she doubts their repair initiatives will have much environmental impact.

"The fashion sector's primary source of impact is due to the overproduction of pieces and growing volumes of garments created," Fletcher said. "Repairing a garment in store happens in addition to these growing production volumes, not instead of them."

Tax incentives

The question facing the fashion industry is whether repairs can evolve from niche service to commercially viable.

Sweden's H&M Group, which has more than 4,000 stores in over 80 countries, has been unusually candid about one of the biggest obstacles: the economics.



Younger shoppers still shop fast fashion because even though it goes against some of their principles, it is one of the most accessible parts of the market

The company has argued that repair and **resale** are desirable goals, but manufacturing new garments costs less than keeping existing ones in use.

H&M experimented with mending and redesign studios in several European cities, but in-store repairs now are offered only at its Paris flagship, a spokesperson said.

The company, which is majority owner of an online consignment platform called Sellpy, also sells preowned pieces at selected stores in 13 cities.

In May, H&M joined Primark, ThredUp and dozens of other fashion and textile businesses in signing a statement that urged governments in North America and the European Union to adopt tax policies that would make eco-friendly services profitable.

Making mending work in retail is challenging because it's labor intensive and must be priced low enough to entice customers, Saunders, of GlobalData, said. Signals from consumers also are mixed, he said.

"I think younger shoppers still shop fast fashion because even though it goes against some of their principles, it is one of the most accessible parts of the market," Saunders said. "But what they're doing as well, though, is they're buying into alternative channels like resale. And they're having things repaired."