

Veja eschews ads and doesn't communicate sustainability measures until it's sure they work

Long before the term "sustainable" was a selling point for businesses, it was the driving force behind the Parisian footwear brand Veja, founded by former bankers and high school friends François-Ghislain Morillion and Sébastien Kopp in 2004.

The duo, intent on providing fair wages and a clean supply chain, have done things differently from other sneaker brands. They eschew advertising and sponsorship deals; they set up manufacturing in Brazil, using organic and regenerative cotton from Brazil and Peru and Amazonian wild rubber from small cooperatives at two to five times the market price; once produced, they ship the shoes from Brazil exclusively by boat—a less carbon-intensive option than by air; and they've entrusted their logistics to Atelier Sans Frontières, a nonprofit that employs disabled workers and people struggling with social inclusion.

Nearly 20 years on, Veja has 500 employees, and last year it sold 12 million pairs of sneakers, booking revenue of €260 million (\$283 million), up 44% from 2021—all without any outside investors. Here, Kopp outlines how the B Corp-certified company continues to improve its sustainability, focusing on transparency, traceability and social justice. The interview has been edited for length and clarity. —*Lindsey Tramuta*

How have you evolved your ways of working since Veja's inception?

It's a never-ending story. We started by asking ourselves where the raw materials came from to make a sneaker and how we could do it more ecologically and with a greater focus on people—farmers growing organic cotton, rubber tappers in the Amazon, workers in the factory, the people in the warehouse packing the shoes. It's been about looking at the whole supply chain and changing problem areas as much as possible. Later, we dug into how the leather was tanned. Was it ecological? No, it was tanned with chrome. So we changed it. Then we investigated alternatives to leather. We're not dogmatic: We try to improve on each path we take. For us there isn't good and bad. There's simply to-be-improved.

For example, when we started with the shoe recycling program, we first needed to collect 10 tons of trashed shoes. In doing so, we noticed that people threw away shoes that were dirty or had a defect but could be repaired. It's from that program that we realized we needed the step before it: repairing. After launching a shoe repair program six years ago, we now have 20 cobblers in the company.

Why did you only start communicating widely about shoe repairs four years after creating the program?

We think it's better to communicate once you've got a track record for your project or initiative, when

you can learn from successes and failures. It's a way to avoid greenwashing. We don't dream—we do things, we see how they evolve. Then we communicate.

You built Veja with a focus on sustainability and ethics. Is it possible for established brands to make the shift?

I can only speak for us. What I do know is that knowing or estimating impact isn't enough—it's doing, being on the ground. We have a 12-person team based in the Amazon working exclusively on wild rubber. In northeastern Brazil, where we buy organic cotton, we have eight people. We know how much the farmers earn, we know how raw materials are sourced, and we know how the shoes are produced because we are on the ground. This traceability allows for sustainable production and social justice. We see reality firsthand, and when you know the reality, you can change it. But not before that, and not from afar.

How do you reconcile the need for society to curb consumption with year-on-year sales growth for Veja?

We are doing things our way, and not advertising is one way of not pushing excessive consumption. We only have two new releases per year. And the shoes are seldom on sale. We don't do deep discounts because they encourage overconsumption. Discounts represent more than 50% of sales turnover for most brands. At Veja, it's less than 1%. What's most important is how a company is run and how it fights overproduction.

