Chapter VI - Re-thinking business practices for good products

On a smaller scale, C2C certified equipment goods are available to consumers, and Swiss firm Rohner produces the Climatex Lifecycle biodegradable fabric, used extensively in the office furniture manufacturing business. The material is compostable, and true to the C2C founding principle of "waste = food", "the team decided to design a fabric that would be safe enough to eat", said architect William McDonough. But the story of Climatex also illustrates another aspect of the Cradle to Cradle philosophy, that places "social responsibility" among its principles.

The Climatex Lifecycle fabric, a good product whose formula is now freely accessible – when environmental and social values meet

© Climatex
When carrying out the initial research on materials to create what was to become the first 100% biodegradable synthetic fabric ever produced, the team asked various suppliers for the composition of their ingredients (dyes, notably) in order to assess their degree of healthiness. Not surprisingly, they bumped against the "secret recipe" argument but eventually Ciba-Geigy agreed to play the game. Out of the 8000 or so elements analysed, only 16 were selected, but that was enough to create a complete new fabric line. Rohner then had to overcome the hurdle of the traditional chemical treatment involved in the twisting of yarn, and had to convince one of their suppliers to actually change their processes!

Eventually, Climatex went into production and the regulators inspecting the factory are said to have been astounded to realize that the water coming out of the factory was as clean or cleaner than the water coming in from the town’s drinking water supply sources; according to the Investor Environmental Health Network, who published a case study on the matter. The same source states: By 2002, Climatex Lifecycle accounted for a third of Rohner’s approximately $8 million in revenues. The fabric had drastically reduced waste disposal costs because Rohner no longer had to pay to send trimmings to be burned at a Swiss-regulated incinerator or to Spain. Scraps of the all-natural product were made into a felt-like material and sold to local farmers and gardeners for use as mulch or groundcover. Rohner saw reduction in its overall production costs, having eliminated the need for filtering of dyes and chemicals in the production process. Other positive effects of the new production process were the elimination of regulatory paperwork and the freeing of space that had been used for the storage of hazardous chemicals.

As importantly, and as surprising as it may seem, the company decided to share this valuable asset, allowing the entire fabric industry to use the Climatex Lifecycle production process! As Bonnie Sonnenschein, corporate marketing manager for DesignTex (who had invested in the project) explained:

"It had been seven years since we developed Climatex Lifecycle, and in that time, to our knowledge, no one else developed a 100% safely biodegradable fabric, although there was a big interest in it. It’s not really green thinking if we just hold that information secret. It’s a good product that everyone should use."

Read further: Case studies