

RUNWAY

How Sustainable Is Consigning Clothing? The RealReal Is Glad You Asked

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHIL OH

There has been a 400 percent increase in the consumption of clothing over the past 20 years, according to data provided by The RealReal. What happens to all of those clothes after they go out of style? The answer is not great. A [2017 report](#) produced by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation with Stella McCartney estimated that one garbage truck full of clothing enters a landfill or is burned every second. According to The RealReal, 95 percent of clothing could be reused or reworn. See the problem?

To help publicize the sustainability of consigning clothing and participating in a circular economy, The RealReal this week quietly rolled out its first consumer-facing Sustainability Calculator. Using women's garments as a case study, TRR collaborated with experts from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, the World Resources Institute, and Shift Advantage to estimate the amount of water and energy saved by consigning a garment versus making that garment new. The calculator is proprietary and apparently the first of its kind; it allows consignors to see the environmental impact of their actions on their My Sales page, where the estimates are shared in a small font beside sellers' profits. As a user consigns more, those numbers will continue to rise, reflecting a positive impact on the environment in real time.

Some numbers provided by TRR to put it in perspective: Consigning one pair of jeans conserves 279 liters of water. One silk dress saves 30 liters. A cashmere sweater saves 80. (These numbers are averages and estimates based on the fact that TRR does not have transparency into the production of garments listed on its site.) The retailer also estimates a one-third displacement rate, meaning that for every one item consigned, one-third of that item is not produced anew.

“Our clients have told us for years that the sustainability element is one of the biggest motivators for buying or consigning with us, but for the first time we really wanted to be able to quantify exactly how positive consigning is for the environment,” says Allison Sommer, the director of strategic initiatives for The RealReal. “We wanted to make sure that we're really putting our money where our mouth is and it's not just marketing jargon. We are credible, and we're helping lead the conversation around sustainable fashion.”

By tallying the net positive effect of reselling last season's must-have dress or parka, The RealReal hopes to inspire more consigning and buying—which translates to both sustainability and profit—and also to educate shoppers and brands on the impact of participating in a circular economy. “I see a future where every brand, every retailer, has a resale option,” Sommer says hopefully. “A future where a built-in circular economy is assumed.”

So far Sommer and TRR have found two key fashion-world players to help. Stella McCartney was the first brand to partner with the resale site to offer a \$100 gift card for her stores when a user consigned a Stella McCartney item. Now Dôen has linked with The RealReal for the month of April, offering a \$50 Dôen credit for every Dôen item consigned at TRR's New York or Los Angeles stores. To those in the luxury world who dismiss consignment sites like The RealReal, Sommer has this to say: “We really do fuel the primary market, not only by driving our consignors back to shop primary when they see a space in their closet, but also because we're granting this seemingly newfound income so these consignors are able to go back to primary, buying new, and they're excited to do so because it has a resale value. It's full-circle.”



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