

CASE STUDY TITLE: YUMA LABS SUNGLASSES: IT’S NOT WASTE UNTIL IT’S WASTED

AUTHOR: **SDT**

THEME: CIRCULAR ECONOMY (DESIGN AND PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION, RECOVERY AND WASTE MANAGEMENT)

Case study description:

Yuma Labs is a Belgian start-up that produces sustainable eyewear, under the brand’s own label and in collaboration with fashion houses all over the world, following the principle of circularity.

The 10 million tons of plastic people dump into the ocean every year is well documented, but how the football-field-size islands of polymer bobbing around the Atlantic and Pacific are held together by plastic nets from fishing trawlers is less understood. Some 640,000 tons of old nets are lost or discarded annually.

The company’s sunglasses are made entirely from plastic reclaimed from the sea—old bottles and nets, specifically. Thanks to the use of waste, Yuma Labs maximizes efforts to create a closed loop where a product loses as little value as possible. If the sunglasses wear out after years of enjoyment, the client can return them free of charge. Afterwards, they will be recycled again, staying away from landfills. Yuma Labs wants to send a clear message of sustainability. When a customer is done with a pair of sunglasses, a painless return process lets her send it back to Yuma Labs for disassembly and recycling.

For the end customer, it’s low-effort and postage-paid. For Yuma Labs, it means a continuous supply of raw material and a chance to stay engaged with customers, keeping their loyalty through multiple repeat purchases.

A chemical engineer by training, De Neubourg started Yuma Labs after years as a circularity consultant to large corporations. It was a kind of dream job for a new graduate, one wholly aligned with his values. Eventually, he was tired of endlessly “talking the talk” about sustainability without seeing companies take concrete action.

With his experience engineering circular business processes, Kickstarter funding, and digital-modeling technology from Autodesk, Yuma Labs was born. In five years, it’s gone from a bootstrapped startup with a 3D-printing microfactory to a high-growth business using injection molding for high-volume production.

“I wanted to get away from the tree-hugger associations that many people still have regarding green branding,” says company founder Sebastiaan De Neubourg. To get people on board with sustainability, he believes it has to become aspirational—cool, in other words. So what better way to build a circular business than with cool’s ultimate accessory?

“It occurred to me that sunglasses would be an ideal vehicle for making people enthusiastic about the circular economy,” he says. “I wanted to demonstrate that it can be easy, affordable, and convenient. That’s more likely to create a light-bulb moment where people say: ‘Okay, I get it. This is what the circular economy looks like.’”

Environmental and/or social effects:

The following factors constitute important environmental and social effects in relation to this case:

- Excess and fast consumption vs responsible consumption and production
- Ocean plastic pollution, waste management and recycling



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- Circular design and manufacturing

Conclusion:

With a clear mission and sense of purpose, Yuma Labs hopes to spark the conversation about circularity and offer an alternative, far away from excess and fast-consumption.

Discussion questions:

What is the problematic situation Yuma Labs is trying to solve? (problem)

Why did they decide to solve it? What drives them? (purpose)

What are Yuma Labs's activities? What do they do to solve it/them? What other steps would you take to solve the problem? (solution)

What is their target group? Who are their clients? Who are their customers? (customer segments)

How will Yuma Labs's activities change the world or the situation for the better? (impact)

And how will they know that they achieved that? (key metrics)

So what does Yuma Labs do differently? What do their customers perceive as the biggest value? (unique value proposition)

In which ways do they deliver their products or services (channels)

What are their main costs and what is the main source of their revenue? (revenue)

STAKEHOLDERS: (1) CONSUMERS, (2) DESIGNERS, (3) FASHION HOUSES, (4) RETAILERS, (5) GOVERNMENTS

ETHICAL ISSUES (POSITIVE, NEGATIVE) IN RELATION TO THE SCENARIO: (1) RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION, (2) CIRCULAR DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING, (3) WASTE MANAGEMENT, (4) CLIMATE CHANGE, (5) OCEAN PLASTIC POLLUTION

GREEN SKILLS ADDRESSED: DESIGN SKILLS, LEADERSHIP SKILLS, MANAGEMENT SKILLS, FINANCIAL SKILLS, PROCUREMENT SKILLS, WASTE MANAGEMENT SKILLS, COMMUNICATION SKILLS

SDGS ADDRESSED: GOAL 9: INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE, GOAL 12: RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION, GOAL 13: CLIMATE ACTION, GOAL 14: LIFE BELOW WATER, GOAL 17: PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

