



**Product
Stewardship
Centre of
Excellence**

**CASE
STUDY**



Bianca Spender

This case study explores the product stewardship initiatives of Bianca Spender, a prominent made-in-Australia womenswear brand. In light of the fashion industry's significant environmental and social impact, Bianca Spender recognises the urgent need for change. In this case study, we examine the brand's design-driven product stewardship initiatives that are working to achieve environmental, social and economic benefits across the product lifecycle.

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Product Stewardship in Action with

BIANCA SPENDER

INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry has long been recognised as one of the world's most environmentally and socially unsustainable industries.¹ The overproduction and overconsumption of clothing are crucial parts of the problem. Australians consume 56 new items or 14.8 kg of clothing per person each year and discard 10 kilograms per person in landfills.²

The environmental impact of the fashion industry has broader implications as well. If the fashion industry continues operating business as usual it will account for 26% of the world's carbon budget by 2050, making it nearly impossible to stay below the 2°C warming limit set by the Paris Agreement.⁴ This highlights the urgent and essential need for the fashion industry to rein in its impact on the environment and adopt more sustainable practices.

This case study focuses on Bianca Spender, a leading Australian womenswear brand. Founded in 2009, all of the design, development and production work that goes into the Bianca Spender brand happens on-shore in Australia. In examining several product stewardship initiatives the brand engages with across the product lifecycle, we highlight product stewardship's environmental, economic, and social benefits.

PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

All who design, make, import, distribute and sell products are primarily responsible for the environmental and human health impacts at all product lifecycle stages. This means product stewardship action can focus across the whole lifecycle of a product or its packaging.

¹ Bick, R., Halsey, E., & Ekenga, C. (2018). The global environmental injustice of fast fashion. *Environmental Health*, 17(1), 92. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>

² Australian Fashion Council. (2022). National Clothing Product Stewardship Scheme Milestone 1.4. Clothing Data Report. Retrieved from

<https://ausfashioncouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AFC-NCPSS-Data-Report.pdf>

Fashion design businesses are increasingly engaging with product stewardship initiatives across the product lifecycle, which, in addition to product design, production and material choices, also includes initiatives such as rental, reuse, product take-back, and recycling at the end of useful life. Domestically, examples of these practices include designed interventions at bassike to produce long-lasting garments and the fashion rental platform GlamCorner, which provides an alternative to ownership, both of which have been the subject of previous case studies.

DESIGN-DRIVEN PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

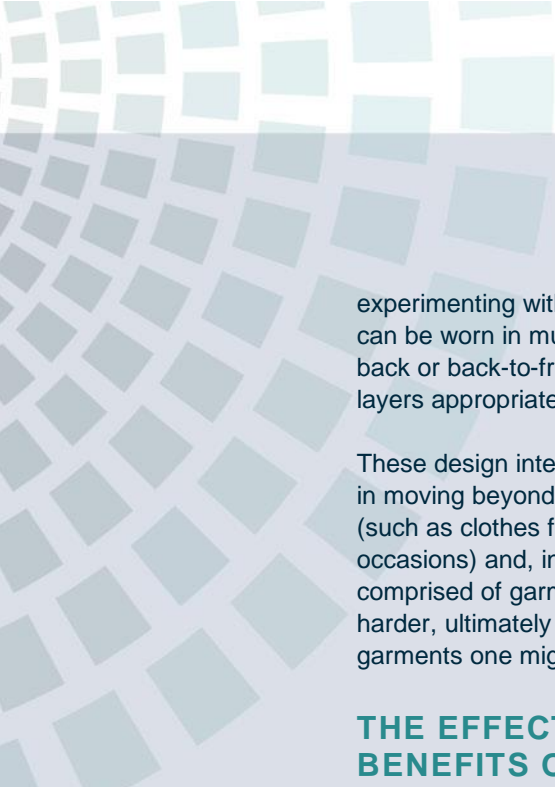
At Bianca Spender, product stewardship begins with designing garments with a long useful life that may extend across multiple owners. Bianca Spender has embraced a 'slow-fashion' approach centred around investing in durable, high-quality pieces to promote a shift in consumption habits.

At the launch of Seamless, the product stewardship scheme for the fashion industry in Australia, Bianca Spender described how COVID-19 has and continues to change how we work and live, which has implications for the kinds of garments we wear and how we wear them. For example, she described how this had been incorporated into subtle but incredibly important design details, such as dresses with waist ties that are adjustable or have been cut on the bias so they can grow or shrink with a body.

As Spender described, the adjustability of a garment is not only practical and useful to the initial owner of that garment. It adds additional value when looking to give that garment a second life, whether through resale, sharing or swapping. The brand has also been

<https://ausfashioncouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AFC-NCPSS-Data-Report.pdf>

⁴ Ellen MacArthur Foundation. Fashion and the Circular Economy Deep Dive. Retrieved from <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/fashion-and-the-circular-economy-deep-dive>



experimenting with designing garments that can be worn in multiple ways, whether front-to-back or back-to-front or through additional layers appropriate for work and home.

These design interventions support customers in moving beyond having multiple wardrobes (such as clothes for work, home and special occasions) and, instead, one wardrobe comprised of garments that can work a lot harder, ultimately reducing the number of garments one might need to own.

THE EFFECTIVENESS AND BENEFITS OF PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

Research conducted by the UTS Institute for Sustainable Futures with the Product Stewardship Centre of Excellence has shown that product stewardship action is effective in reducing the environmental and human health impacts of products and materials.⁵

This research, [Assessing the Benefits and Effectiveness of Product Stewardship](#), is the first comprehensive evaluation of the benefits (environmental, social, and economic) and effectiveness of product stewardship and EPR activity in Australia. In the next section, we map the product stewardship actions of Bianca Spender across these three pillars.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

“As a proud Australian Designer, I have found myself increasingly confronted by the destruction of Australia’s natural Landscape. This land, our home, has always been the most important source of inspiration for my designs. We all have only one planet to live

⁵ Product Stewardship Centre of Excellence. (2022). Assessing the Benefits and Effectiveness of Product Stewardship. Retrieved from <https://stewardshipexcellence.com.au/news/assessing-the-benefits-and-effectiveness-of-product-stewardship/>

⁶ Bianca Spender (n.d.). Between the Seams. Retrieved from: <https://biancaspender.com/pages/betweentheseams>

and prosper on. We all need to take care of it together.”⁶ – Bianca Spender

The environmental benefits of product stewardship include eliminating hazardous materials, conserving resources and materials, preventing and reducing waste, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Bianca Spender highlights its commitment to creating environmental benefits through various initiatives, such as working towards carbon neutrality and partnering with the Australian Water Stewardship to assess and reduce water consumption and river pollution from mills and suppliers.

After committing to becoming carbon neutral, Bianca Spender has been certified as carbon neutral by Climate Active for 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The brand also incorporates 50% deadstock in its collections, repurposing existing fabrics bought from other designers instead of making new ones.⁷ Currently, the brand is interested in increasing the utilisation of deadstock materials and is working to overcome issues around the traceability of deadstock fabrics.

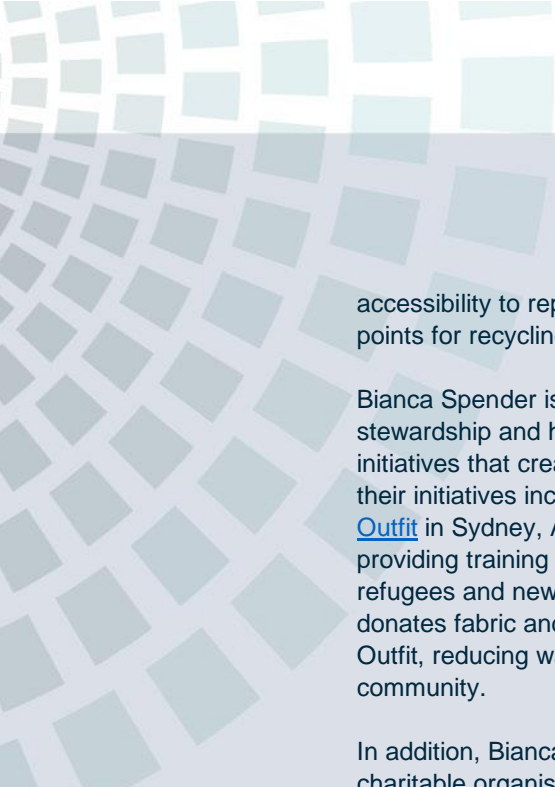
The brand's shop bags and e-commerce shipping cartons are also made from 50-80% post-consumer waste. They are 100% recyclable, and as a next step, the brand is working to introduce post-consumer recycled garment bags and sustainably produced garment hangers for retail stores.⁸

THE SOCIAL BENEFITS OF PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

The social benefits of product stewardship include improved workers' health and safety across the supply chain and increased

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



accessibility to repair services or collection points for recycling.

Bianca Spender is committed to product stewardship and has implemented several initiatives that create social benefits. One of their initiatives includes supporting [The Social Outfit](#) in Sydney, Australia, a social enterprise providing training and employment for refugees and new migrants. Bianca Spender donates fabric and materials to The Social Outfit, reducing waste and supporting the local community.

In addition, Bianca Spender supports various charitable organisations, including [Thread Together](#), [Lou's Closet](#) (part of [Lou's Place](#)) and [Barnardo's](#) through clothing donations (typically 20 garments per donation) and vouchers. Lou's Closet benefits communities in need, particularly women facing homelessness, domestic violence, mental health challenges, and addiction. Barnardo's works to empower vulnerable individuals and protect at-risk children by providing support programs and access to essential resources.

Bianca Spender is also actively involved in mentorship activities in the industry, including offering internships and supporting the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Indigenous Pathways Program and collaborating with The Social Outfit. The brand is also an active member of the Australian Fashion Council and advocates for a more collaborative fashion industry.⁹

THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF PRODUCT STEWARDSHIP

The economic benefits of product stewardship include job creation, upskilling, reskilling, and creating new markets for recovered materials.

Since its inception, Bianca Spender has been committed to local garment manufacturing, which they emphasise as crucial for environmental and social sustainability. Bianca Spender works with local manufacturers who are paid appropriately for their time and work in safe and fair conditions.¹⁰ The brand's

history of local manufacturing is a point of pride and something they frequently communicate to their customers.

Local manufacturing has also proven to be a source of competitive advantage and resilience before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite challenges such as border closures, local production has provided flexibility and confidence that orders can be delivered and has allowed the brand to quickly pivot to meet changing consumer needs.

REFLECTING ON A DECADE OF PROGRESS

Bianca Spender, who has been in the industry for over a decade, is reflecting on their sustainability journey thus far. The team is building on existing strengths and deepening its brand impact. This includes an assessment of past initiatives and seeking new opportunities to promote sustainability and product stewardship.


Given resourcing constraints (including a small head office team of 16 responsible for everything from design and draping to finance, marketing and sustainability), a recent team strategy meeting resulted in hiring an external sustainability consultancy.

This consultancy will help the business evaluate the effectiveness and benefits of product stewardship initiatives, as the internal team is passionate but resource-constrained. The brand has identified the first step of engaging in the process of stakeholder engagement with staff, local manufacturers, and customers) to gain insight into their key sustainability and stewardship concerns.

Once key issues are identified, Bianca Spender will collaborate with the sustainability consultant to establish targets and timeframes (12, 24, and 36 months) for implementing resulting product stewardship initiatives across the product lifecycle. The business will start with these timeframes to ensure realistic

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.



goals, support transparency with key stakeholders, and ensure targets are achieved.

LESSONS LEARNED

Bianca Spender has built a fashion business by integrating carefully considered design and high-quality production. With a strong foundation, the company is now well-positioned to advance its sustainability and product stewardship initiatives. Additionally, it is well-equipped to contribute to the future development of a circular Australian fashion industry.

There are three key takeaways from this case study.

First, this case study highlights the importance of design-led product stewardship, which has benefits across the product life-cycle. In the case of Bianca Spender, this includes designing garments for a long useful life, exploring ways to reduce environmental impact, such as incorporating deadstock materials and using recyclable packaging, and partnering with local charities to achieve social benefits.

Second, product stewardship initiatives drive environmental, social, and economic benefits. Bianca Spender's actions demonstrate these benefits through initiatives like supporting social enterprises, local manufacturing, and collaboration within the fashion industry.

Third, businesses reflecting on their sustainability journey and seeking to increase its impact should not be afraid to seek additional support when needed. By working with an external consultancy, Bianca Spender can engage stakeholders, identify key concerns, and establish targets and timeframes for implementing product stewardship initiatives.

NOTE:

The content of this case study is information of a general nature sourced from public sources and investigations conducted by the Product Stewardship Centre of Excellence. It does not

represent advice, direction or endorsement from the Product Stewardship Centre of Excellence, nor does it represent the only method or practice to address the topics laid out in this document. Individuals or organisations are encouraged to conduct their own analysis and consideration of strategic options relevant to their situation before taking action in regard to the matters covered.

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