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Repair as a Standard Service

How can we ensure that clothes last longer and are worn for longer? This is the central question behind Care & Repair, a 2.5-year project by NewTexEco: the research community in which ArtEZ University of the Arts, Saxion University of Applied Sciences and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences work with around thirty industry partners towards a more sustainable textile sector.

The project is now about a year underway, and the focus is shifting from research to practice. “This project takes you out of your bubble.”

ArtEZ’s Fashion Professorship is involved in the Care & Repair project. Its researchers have been investigating the relationship people have with their clothes for some time. After all, a garment may technically last ten years, but that does not mean someone will wear it for ten years. That is why Care & Repair looks not only at design and production, but also at the sociocultural aspects. Why do we wash clothes so often, and what makes us stop wearing a garment at a certain point?

The design process plays an important role here. It is not just about how to make a good, durable garment, but also about what happens to it after it leaves the shop. How is it worn and cared for? Where does it break? Is it easy to repair? And what can we learn from this for the next design?

Repair offers many opportunities in this respect. One of the design coalitions within Care & Repair is therefore exploring how repairs can be made easier and more appealing during the warranty period. Care & Repair partners Livera, Fabriek Fris and Dobbi are working together on this, each contributing their own expertise.

Repair as the first option

An underwire coming out of a bra, a broken bikini clasp or a strap that has been attached incorrectly: Livera also regularly encounters items that need repairing. “Many stores work with a seamstress,” says Terry Hommelberg from Livera. “But not every seamstress is equally experienced in working with bras and bikinis, and the quality varies. In addition, someone from the store has to take the item to the seamstress and collect it again.”

“If a repair costs ten euros, but you can also write off a bra and give the customer a new one, I know what a retailer will do.”

Repairing is not always the easiest option administratively, either. “If a repair costs ten euros, but you can also write off a bra and give the customer a new one, I know what a retailer will do.” Terry thinks that is a shame, especially when a bra costs €80. The aim is therefore to make repair a serious first option without creating a lot of extra work for the store.

Fabriek Fris may be able to help. The company produces collections for Dutch fashion brands and wants to develop repair into a new business activity. Everything takes place in one location, and a standard protocol can be established for each type of defect. This should help ensure consistent repair quality.

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But one piece of the puzzle was still missing. “We had a whole plan, but discovered that the logistics were very complicated,” says Rosan van Boven from Fabriek Fris. “That is something we cannot do ourselves.” Terry from Livera therefore introduced Fabriek Fris to Dobbi, the nationwide dry-cleaning service she already used.

Dobbi founder Maurits Tiethoff has long been exploring how the company’s logistics network could also be used for other circular services. “For a nationwide repair service, you need a good partner to carry out the repairs. But then the question is: how does the clothing get there? That is the part we can organise.”

Stepping outside your own bubble

The collaboration also shows that scaling up repair requires more than just someone who is handy with a needle and thread. Through the project, Maurits has gained a better understanding of the challenges retailers face. “People sometimes assume that retailers or fashion brands are not interested in this area. But Terry has taught me that there are all kinds of practical and financial issues that need to be resolved before you can introduce something like this.”

For Rosan, the consumer’s perspective was particularly new. Fabriek Fris mainly works for other businesses. “Terry is much closer to the consumer, and some aspects of that are far more complex than I realised. This project takes you out of your bubble.” That is also what Care & Repair is about: bringing together partners who each hold a different part of the problem and the solution. A repair may be perfectly feasible, but if it creates too much extra work for a shop assistant or the consumer chooses not to have it done, it still does not work in practice.

“If repair is to become the first option, it needs to be an appealing and convenient choice.”

Putting it into practice

The coalition is now entering the pilot phase. A number of Livera stores will test the entire process, from accepting a faulty item to transporting it, repairing it and returning it to the store.

The team is also looking at how to present repair to customers. Someone who brings a damaged item to a shop may expect a replacement rather than a repair. If repair is to become the first option, it needs to be an appealing and convenient choice. One of the tools being developed allows a shop assistant to take a photo of the defect and show the customer approximately what the item will look like after repair.

Back to the drawing board

The pilot is intended not only to show whether the repair service works in practice, but also to generate knowledge that is currently scarce. By systematically recording repairs, the partners can gain a clearer picture of which defects occur and what causes garments to break.

If a particular clasp, seam or construction method turns out to cause recurring problems, that information can feed back into the design process. “The best approach,

of course, is still to make sure something does not break in the first place,” says Terry.

Repair as a standard service: a question today, the norm in 15 years?

Over the coming months, the partners will find out whether the system also makes commercial sense. Ultimately, more retailers will need to join. For Fabriek Fris, a successful repair service could also create new employment opportunities. The company was founded with a social mission and offers paid jobs to, among others, newcomers to the Netherlands.

“I would really like to prove that there is a sound business case for this,” says Rosan. “How great would it be if we could create more jobs this way and further develop the social side of our work?” Maurits compares this development with the rise of e-commerce. “Twenty years ago, retailers were still wondering whether they needed a webshop. Now it is impossible to imagine life without one. I hope that in fifteen years’ time, we will look back and find repair, alterations, personalisation, rental and resale just as commonplace as e-commerce is today.”

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