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Alternative Trade Marketing: Three Approaches to Textile Design and Production

by
Mary A. Littrell and Marsha A. Dickson

Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs) are businesses that are deeply committed to a mission of sustainable, people-centered development. By paying textile artisans "as much as possible" rather than "as little as possible," ATOs contrast dramatically with mainstream textile marketers whose attention is directed to meeting customer demand and expanding shareholder profits. A fair trade partnership between textile artisans and retailers involves joint commitment to paying fair wages, offering equitable employment opportunities, providing healthy and safe working conditions, offering technical training, and honoring cultural identity as a stimulus for textile product development. Textiles are marketed through retail specialty stores and catalogs in North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan.

This paper compares three U.S.-based ATOs on their textile design and production work with artisan groups in India, Guatemala, and Panama. MarketPlace Handwork of India draws on indigenous embroidery, patchwork, and recycling techniques for creating a unique textile line. SERRV guides artisans toward textile line development based on product reviews from New York Gift Shows. PEOPLink connects artisans through the internet with a panel of U.S. based designers who critique artisans' fabric and product designs. In creating their own WEB pages in collaboration with PEOPLink, artisans have opportunities to present their "textile realities" to the world. Through cross-group comparisons, effects of gendered behaviors and organizational culture on textile design, production, and artisan empowerment will be explored. Other issues addressed include the value of changing organizational structures for meeting business goals related to artisan group identity, textile quality, entrepreneurial risk-taking, and market diversification.

Dr. Mary Littrell is Professor of Textiles and Clothing at Iowa State University where she conducts research on ethnic product marketing, entrepreneurship, and micro-enterprise development. Dr. Marsha Dickson is Assistant Professor of Textiles and Clothing at the Ohio State University. Her research focuses on textile product development and international trade. Their joint academic training in consumer behavior is a connecting link to their work on artisans and the global market. The authors' forthcoming book for Sage Publications, titled *Social Responsibility in the Global Market: Fair Trade of Cultural Products*, is based on their five years of research on the organizational culture of Alternative Trading Organizations. The book draws from intensive case studies with a wide range of ATOs varying in size, organizational structure, and geographic sourcing; field research with ATO artisans in Guatemala and India; and national surveys with customers from two major ATOs.