

Textiles



Basics of Textile Recycling as a Business

Textiles that are torn, stained, have holes or are simply out of fashion are often destined for the landfill yet still consist of valuable fiber. This fiber can be repurposed into a wide range of objects, including new clothes, jewelry, stuffed animals, purses, rugs, housewares, scarves, apparel and more.

Techniques working with textiles vary but most are based on sewing, weaving or felting the fiber into new products. However, individuals without extensive sewing experience can still launch into the textile recycling market as designers working with seamstresses.

The opportunities are endless. A simple search for “upcycled fashion” at www.etsy.com will show you thousands of items currently being repurposed.

Important Concepts for Developing a Recycled-Textiles Business Enterprise:

- Know how and where you will get your materials
- Understand the value of the material you are working with and how your business will provide a service or added-value to that material
- Reach out to local partners
- Understand your niche and projected clients
- Be diverse and resourceful – Consider making a range of products to sell. For example, use an old sweater to make a new skirt but keep the sweater’s arms to make hand warmers or legwarmers.
- Consider creating a regional textile recycling service or business.
- For designers already creating items from new textiles consider using recycled fabrics and marketing these environmental benefit to your customers.
- Be sure that your recycled textiles are washed and clean before you repurpose/upcycle them
- Start up costs vary widely. Please contact your local NM Small Business Development Center to determine actual costs (www.nmsbdc.org)

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Textile Sources

- Thrift stores – Consider developing a **relationship with your local thrift** store to collect items deemed unsellable.
- Yard Sales
- Used clothing bales are sold by numerous companies for low prices. You can often specify the type of material you’d like, such as sweaters or knits or cotton.
- Friends – Word will quickly spread that you’re utilizing used textiles and you may end up with bags of moth eaten sweaters on your front porch. Let your community know what you need.

According to the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles trade organization, 85% of textiles and clothing end up in a landfill, even though 95% can be reused and recycled.

Potential End Markets

- Online sites specializing in one-of-a-kind products, such as www.etsy.com
- Consider launching a retail store. This can be done more affordably as part of an artists’ cooperative.
- Participate in art markets and fairs.
- Host your own “trunk show” for friends and neighbors. The more practice you get displaying your items in a professional manner, even to friends, the better.
- Approach retail stores or designers about carrying your products. Many items currently produced with new textiles could be produced with recycled textiles. Making the transition from new to recycled could help an existing company cut costs and be more environmentally friendly.

Setting Prices

- See the Recycled Art factsheet for price setting ideas.

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Case Study Example

Upcycled Fashion is a non-profit organization out of Penasco, New Mexico that produces cutting edge clothing with a conscience. The group employs and supports skilled and creative entrepreneurs and designers in rural northern New Mexico. Given the extremely sparse population of the area, the organization provides an alternative way to create income from home and fulfill creative career pursuits.

By re-fashioning clothing that would otherwise be discarded (usually due to being unstylish or stained, yet still having great fiber), their one-of-a-kind garments cost less to make. Furthermore, their designers make a better wage and are able to utilize their skills all while keeping useful items out of the landfill.

They offer mentorships to designers to teach technical skills, and host classes and workshops, technical training classes and are a part of Art for the Heart, a multi-faceted art making organization.

Jean Nichols, founder of Art for the Heart, launched Upcycled Fashion when the economic downturn affected art sales. She understood that in tight times, people would be more likely to purchase clothing and apparel than art. Anita Moss is the director of Upcycled Fashion and draws on her business and fine arts background to focus on encouraging and training seamstresses in product development, becoming entrepreneurs themselves and marketing their products.

In the late 1990s Nichols received a grant and built a ReUse Center out of shredded paper bales, tire rims, post and beam and bottles and cans. It is a "neighborhood exchange" for free household goods, books and lots of clothes. The clothes get bagged up and some are used for the Upcycled Fashion project, given to weavers and quilt makers and used for art projects. Items not set aside for repurposing get bagged and sold to Clothes Helping Kids, an Albuquerque non-profit. Space is needed to store the bagged clothes as Clothes Helping Kids only picks up full truckloads. Donating is labor intensive but helps to save clothes from entering landfills.



Opportunities

Keep abreast of any hidden opportunities in your community. For example did your town just pass a plastic bag ban? Maybe it's time to launch a "green" line of reusable shopping bags made from discarded textiles.

Host a clothing exchange within your community. Invite friends and neighbors to clean out their closets and bring unwanted items to the exchange for others to take. It's a great way to save money on useable clothes but undoubtedly there will also be unwanted items left over that can be repurposed.

Get creative. Shredded 100% cotton, wool or other natural fibers can be used for animal bedding and then composted. Out of old clothing or other fabric scraps, you can create a handy cleaning tool, a trendy new bag, a soft rug, a comfy pillow or a warm blanket....opportunity abounds.

Be sure to obtain all required business licenses and insurance.



Potential Upcycled Textile Products:

- Discarded clothes and sweaters into new, stylish clothes
- Neck ties & used fabric turned into hand-woven rugs, purses, placemats, etc
- Discarded clothes into stuffed animals and toys
- T-shirts into new skirts
- Old sweaters into scarves, legwarmers or arm warmers

