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Andrew Hoffman

## Building Transparency within the Sustainable Apparel Coalition: The Road to Successful Pre-Competitive Collaboration

*“No company alone can shift the existing industry paradigms. To ignite the change required to redefine how the industry is run, peers and competitors come together as a united front, adhering to the coalition’s set of core collaboration values that are designed to further impactful change across the industry. Through SAC membership, brands, retailers, and manufacturers commit to transparency, the sharing of best practices, and making meaningful improvements, a full-circle collaboration that benefits all involved.”*  
-- Sustainable Apparel Coalition

Sean Cady, the newly appointed chairman of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) board of directors, leaned back in his chair, staring down at the letter that had just landed on his desk. It was mid-2019—more than nine years after the SAC had begun pioneering the Higg Index, a universal sustainability index measuring the social and environmental impact of brands, manufacturing facilities, and products—and still none of the Higg Index data had been made fully public as the coalition had initially envisioned. The non-governmental organization (NGO) community had taken note, and the letter on Cady’s desk was the latest in a string of communications from Human Rights Watch calling for greater transparency.

Also serving as the global vice president of sustainability and responsibility at VF Corporation, one of the world’s largest apparel, footwear, and accessories companies with subsidiary brands such as Vans, The North Face, and Timberland, Cady was no stranger to receiving adversarial communications from NGOs. However, he knew that planning and executing a response on behalf of the SAC—a pre-competitive collaboration with membership that spanned upwards of 250 global footwear and apparel brands, manufacturers, academic institutions, and other associations<sup>1</sup>—would be different and significantly more complicated than responding and reacting on behalf of a single company.

In his role as the board chair, Cady considered his options. Releasing the current Higg Index data at the behest of Human Rights Watch would open the coalition up to criticism about its data integrity and

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