

When a B grade is a good thing

B Corp certification requires passing a rigorous assessment of worker pay, climate impact and more. The reward? An honest, hard-earned seal of approval for the world's truly ethical and sustainable businesses

GAYLE MACDONALD

Two years ago, Ben Sehl, co-founder of the Toronto-based cotton apparel line Kotn, became suspicious of the number of players in the fashion industry claiming to be ethical and sustainable.

"Green-washing" or "social-washing," when companies make misleading claims about the environmental/community benefits of their products, is common, and Sehl and his two partners, Rami Helali and Mackenzie Yeates, didn't want Kotn to be lumped into that dubious mix.

Their solution to set the record straight? Apply for B Corp certification, a little-known stamp of approval that, at its most basic level, means a company has proven its commitment to do good. In other words, they've jumped through hoops to meet rigorous social and environmental standards that set them apart from companies that only talk the talk.

"We wanted to set the bar higher for ourselves," says Sehl, whose four-year-old company buys Egyptian cotton from 690 small farming families in the Nile Delta region, an impoverished area where more than 70 per cent of residents are illiterate. "In our industry, where fast fashion is a huge environmental concern, B Corp [status] was a great way for us to say, 'This is a line in the sand. This is a code of conduct we abide by at a bare minimum.'"

Kotn received its B Corp badge two

years ago, and has since built two schools in the region and has another two opening later this year. "B Corp is all about holding companies accountable. It's a promise to our employees, stakeholders, customers and community that we won't just say we're going to give back - we'll actually do it."

It's not easy to achieve B Corp certification, launched more than a decade ago by a non-profit organization called B Lab, based in Wayne, Pa. Candidates have to pass a system called B Impact Assessment, which measures how well workers are paid and treated, how businesses affect the climate and if B Corps are accountable to stakeholders, not just shareholders. Applicants' answers are then graded, with a minimum score of 80 needed for certification. A perfect score is 200 - and it's not easy to get.

To date, there are more than 3,000 B Corp-designated companies across 160 industries in 60 countries. Its logo is on everything from ice cream (Ben & Jerry's) to cosmetics (Beautycounter); shoes (Allbirds) to a slew of fashion brands, such as Eileen Fisher, Patagonia, Cotopaxi and Athleta.

In Canada, there are 255 B Corp brands, representing an equally diverse cross-section of businesses, including swimwear (Loka), breweries (Beau's), organic food delivery (Spud.ca in British Columbia and Alberta), housewares (Goodee), wine (Summerhill Pyramid Winery in Kelowna) and casual wear (Tentree of Regina,



Toronto-based apparel line Kotn buys cotton from 690 small farming families in Egypt's impoverished Nile Delta region. Since receiving its B Corp badge two years ago, the brand has built two schools in the area. NOUR EL REFAI

which plants 10 trees for every item purchased).

Husein Rahemtulla, co-founder of meal-kit company Fresh Prep in Vancouver, can attest that getting B Corp status is no easy matter. He and his team spent almost a year compiling all the information needed to answer more than 300 questions on everything from fair wages and benefits, environmental impact, community engagement and corporate governance. "It's rigorous," he says. "But it should be. Our industry needs to be held accountable for how wasteful it is in terms of packaging."

Fresh Prep received its B Badge in March and aims to be one of the first meal-kit delivery companies to be zero-waste. "B Corp is a benchmark to measure yourself," Rahemtulla says. "It highlights where you've done well, and where you need to improve. But most important, it shows our customers we're not just using their money to pay dividends or increase shareholder value. We're using it to help solve complex social issues."

Toronto retail consultant Bruce Winters says the B Corp designation has taken time to catch on. However, in the past two years, he's seen an uptick in the number of companies that proudly bear the insignia.

"It has been under a lot of people's radars, but with reports coming out on an almost daily basis of the harm we're doing to our planet, more companies, big and small, are becoming more interested," he says. "Morally, it's the right thing to do, and from a business perspective it's the right thing to do. A growing number of consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, want companies that are sticking their necks out and being more socially responsible. B Corp is a way to formalize that, to some degree."

At Kotn, Sehl says it took them more than six months to gather all the information required for the certification and a few agonizing months more to find out if they qualified. They passed with a score of 95.5 (the average score of businesses that apply is 50.9). They also ranked in the top 10 per cent of B Corp companies worldwide in terms of community involvement.

"We don't want to hide behind anything," says Sehl, whose company just launched a "traceability" link on its website so customers can follow its supply chain from A to Z. "Our customers ... should be able to know where a product came from, who made it, how and when. That shouldn't be a luxury, but a standard."



Kotn, whose store at Toronto's 754 Queen St. W is seen above, is one of more than 3,000 companies across 160 industries in 60 countries to receive the certification. ADAM MOCO

Pamper the planet

A spa day can be a minefield of disposable products and stacks of barely used towels. But, as **Caitlin Agnew** reports, there's a push to make treating yourself more sustainable

In today's anxious world, where worries about issues such as climate change are causing collective panic attacks, escaping reality for an afternoon can be therapeutic. But what happens when your preferred way to relax is part of the problem?

Despite its innumerable restorative benefits, going to the spa can also be a minefield of un-

necessary waste - from single-use plastics and disposable items such as slippers and hair nets to excessive use of towels. With spas taking steps toward sustainable operations, however, it is possible to self-indulge without being overindulgent of resources, with change coming from both spa guests and operators alike.

Last spring, I visited two Fairmont hotel properties in British Columbia to experience how they've incorporated unique local offerings into the spa menus.

At the Fairmont Pacific Rim in downtown Vancouver, my Fountain of Youth treatment included raw ocean ingredients such as locally harvested seaweed with Canadian glacial clay. At the Fairmont Empress in Victoria, the Salish Sea Vitality Treatment used products by local line Seaflo along with fresh seaweed harvested from the nearby Salish Sea.

All Fairmont properties are owned by Accor Hotels, a hospitality group that, globally, plays host to roughly half a million guests every day. For the brand, operating what effectively amounts to a small city comes with social and environmental responsibility, and they've outlined their commitments in their

official Planet 21 guidelines.

With me in B.C. was Rona Berg, an American spa and wellness expert, journalist and the editor-in-chief of Organic Spa magazine. A self-professed lifelong "closet greenie," Berg was one of the first to report on the environmental impact of the beauty industry when she wrote about chemical hazards in salons for The New York Times back in 1993.

From her home base in New York, Berg travels the world to review the top destination spas, telling me about a recent visit to Stanglwirt, a next-level wellness resort and organic farm nestled in the Austrian Alps that uses a biomass power plant powered with bark waste from local sawmills.

Despite great strides being made, such as using renewable energy sources, the five-star experience is easily ruined for Berg. "So many times, I go to some beautiful beachfront property, some gorgeous spa. And I'm sitting there at the restaurant and I order a drink and they come and they plunk a plastic straw in it. And I'm looking out at the ocean and I'm thinking, 'Okay, this straw is going to choke a turtle, a fish. That's where it's going to end up.'"

Over all, Berg says the spa industry is an early adopter of sustainable operations and is leading the charge for other industries to follow. "Spas are moving away from that frivolous model of pampering," she says. "Pampering is great - I have nothing against pampering - but they're shifting more into wellness. When you think about wellness treatments, wellness cuisine, things that are healthier for the mind, the body, the spirit, then you're not going to be thinking about being as wasteful."

"The pampering can still happen, I don't want to take away from the pampering," echoes Daryll Naidu, operations manager

at Dermalogica Canada. "We need to maintain our health and wellness in a mindful way where we're thinking of the environment." The skin-care line has been used in professional spas since 1986 and is making considerable strides toward sustainability in all aspects of its business, from product formulation to the treatment protocols followed by skin therapists, to making 90 per cent of packaging recyclable or bio-degradable by 2020.

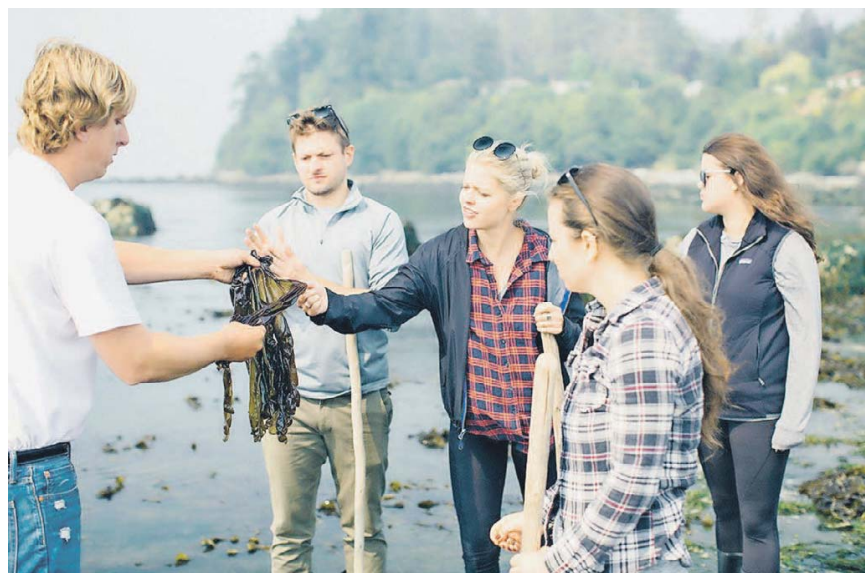
It's a logical step for Naidu, who points out that sustainability goes hand-in-hand with wellness. "Those two can't operate independently of each other," he says. While offering a sense of luxury and reducing waste can be a balancing act, it's important to keep in mind that part of the problem is consumer behaviour. Naidu points to the temptation to overindulge in towels, with spa guests using as many as three to go from pool to shower, as an example. "People do this unconsciously," he says.

If spa sustainability is on your wellness agenda, it's worth spending a few minutes online to research your destination before booking an appointment to ensure that it meets your personal standards. Do they have a proper waste-management program in place, such as that offered by Green Circle Salons to help hair salons properly deal with tons of waste? Are they free of single-use plastic, like California's Ojai Valley Inn and Spa? Are their products sourced responsibly, like the Fairmont's biodegradable seaweed?

And before you leave the house, make sure to pack your own refillable water bottle, because small gestures can make a big difference.

The writer travelled as a guest of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts. It did not review or approve this article.

Special to The Globe and Mail



The Salish Sea Vitality Treatment, at Victoria's Fairmont Empress hotel, uses products by local skin-care line Seaflo, along with fresh seaweed harvested from the nearby Salish Sea.