

## ***HIDENET EXCLUSIVE: The story behind BENDY, the new eco-friendly leather flat***

**BENDY**  
by ASHBURY SKIES



It seems that every week brings news of another footwear brand launching “sustainable” models that mistakenly eschew leather as an undesirable material. Enter [BENDY](#), a leather flat that resembles a hybrid between a slip-on sneaker and an espadrille. The shoe boasts a low carbon footprint, generating only 4.5 pounds of greenhouse emissions compared to the 30 pounds generated by the average sneaker, identified through a life-cycle assessment conducted by the MIT Materials Systems lab, according to *Fast Company*.

It’s uncommon to find a startup launching an “eco-friendly” leather shoe, with the current focus in recycling plastics and developing new materials. The problem with most sneakers is that they are made from a long list of materials and the components held together with stitching as well as glue. Created by Mary Sue Papale and Caroline de Baere, BENDY is their effort to create footwear that is stylish and comfortable as well as more sustainable. The design is much simpler than the average sneaker with only five components: A flexible bottom, soft leather, thread, a cushioned footbed and an insole support. Among the features the brand highlights:

- Leather and suede upper, sourced in Italy, from a leading player in ethical, responsible tanning
- Cushioned footbed, like the ones in high performance running shoes
- Flexible man-made bottom
- Low Co2 footprint
- Handcrafted in the USA

We asked de Baere about BENDY, why they chose leather and how they make it sustainable:

**Questions:**

***What was the impetus for creating BENDY?***

So much of the industry has been focused on fast fashion, which is not sustainable because its wastefulness has a negative impact over the years. The idea of creating a comfortable and stylish shoe that is made in smaller runs and is shipped direct to the consumer was very appealing.

We wanted to look at the entire supply chain because consumers are increasingly interested in what they are buying. Our sourcing and production aims to be more sustainable at every step: Our insole boards are precut in St. Louis so there is less volume to ship. We eliminate a great deal of waste by doing small runs made to order and using suede scraps as a liner. The shipping carton for our shoes is actually the shoe box instead of a second box, and it is made from 100% post-consumer waste.



***Given the focus on sustainability, how did you come to use leather in your shoes?***

As a footwear industry veteran, I understand firsthand that leather is an ideal material for shoes and naturally forms to your foot shape. It is often more comfortable and breathable than plastic, synthetic or vegan materials.

Plastics never decompose. For some, it is not the best choice to put on your skin. Many of these materials are petroleum based and the creation of them can be at odds with the environment.

Modern technology and innovation have dramatically changed leather industry practices for the better. Leather is also a known by-product of the meat industry. When choosing materials and where to source our shoes, we looked at: product quality, leaders in tanning, water-based finishes, reduced environmental impact and working conditions for the workers. We considered these factors in the ongoing search for sustainable and ethically manufactured leathers.

I believe sustainability is about more than just where materials are sourced. It is about considering the product cycle as a whole; ethical working conditions, reducing the distance the raw materials travel, how facilities generate power, supply chain, packaging and so much more.

***So many brands have turned away from leather to totally synthetic footwear mainly for cost, and many of those products are not eco-friendly or sustainable. How did you source your leather/what process did you go through to find your supplier (s)?***

Our factory in Los Angeles stocks leather on-site. It was the perfect pairing! We are able to pick what we need for production right there, reducing transportation all over the globe and thereby reducing carbon emissions.

The leather we selected originates from an Italian tannery that uses modern technology and is a leading player in ethical, responsible tanning. They have developed a water-based finishing process (instead of chemical based) which is safer for workers and the environment. They have built water purification plants and have reduced carbon dioxide emissions by opening 4 co-generation plants.

The tannery has been awarded a Gold Certified Environmental Stewardship Certification for ethical, environmental and safe practices in the processing of hides. They also hold the BLUE Angel certificate for minimizing their impact on the health and the environment during the production phase as well as in recycling and disposal phases.

Another initiative has been to research sustainable leather sourcing options more locally. I have selected two leather suppliers in California (one is just 3 miles from the factory) that have an area devoted to dead stock and overages. This provides us with an amazing opportunity to use leathers that would otherwise end up in landfills.

When available, we plan to buy verified leftover and over-produced leathers. We will be able to select these leftover leathers because we do smaller production runs. As an online business, we will launch new styles when they are ready.

***What were your requirements?***

We believe the fashion industry is ready for disruption and taking a sustainable approach will become easier over time. Modern, comfortable and ethical; the key to the BENDY is simplicity in design, executed using only 5 components vs. 25-30 in an average sports shoe.

Our requirement for sourcing and production was to partner with an innovative factory in the United States that takes the same ethical approach we take to manufacturing. Sourcing sustainable materials is a process we will strive to improve upon with each production run. We know we have a ways to go and intend to keep moving forward.

***Do you think there are opportunities for the footwear industry in general following this model?***

I believe we have an opportunity to consider sustainability as a long-term business strategy by investing in ethically sourced leather, materials and quality vs lower quality alternatives. Great quality doesn't go to the landfill in the way fast fashion and mass production can.

It is important to take control of your supply chain by educating yourself and asking the right questions of raw material manufacturers.

The key is to inform end consumers who will, in turn, put pressure on suppliers and brands to provide solutions that are not at odds with the environment.

de Baere says that leather has gotten a bad rap in all of the controversy over alternative materials, animal issues and sustainability. She highlights that it's not as simple as choosing leather or an alternative. "There's a big educational piece to this. Where is the plastic or alternative material from? Is it made from fossil fuels, or is it from something natural? Is the recycled ocean plastic being shipped across

the ocean to a factory to be remade into shoes? What kind of plants are processing the materials?"

Despite all the open questions to be answered, she says that BENDY will also look at using alternatives in addition to leather. "We're also looking at all the components of the shoe. The outsole is currently not what we want it to be and we aim to make it from a sustainable material by 2020."