

Arlene Birt

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Arlene Birt designs background communications: bringing cultural, environmental, political and historical stories into focus. She leads the Visual Storytelling group at Haberman—a public relations firm (www.modernstorytellers.com)

Arlene's work was featured in Creative Review (UK), U.S. News and World Report, BusinessWeek.com, Packaging Design Magazine, Worldchanging.com, SEED Magazine, at the Barcelona Design Museum and the Walker Art Center, among others.

Arlene has consulted with the United Nations Environment Programme in Sustainable Consumption and Production, is adjunct faculty at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design's Sustainability Certificate program, and catalogs examples of visual product backgrounds at www.arlenebirt.com/blog. Arlene holds a Masters of Design from Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

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Background Stories – visual communication for sustainability

Abstract:

With the aim to help consumers reconnect to the larger impacts of products, 'Background Stories' employs visual communication, Life Cycle Analysis, and strategies to make sustainability details from Corporate Social Responsibility reports available at the point-of-sale.

A Fulbright grant to the Netherlands resulted in a graphic communication system that serves as a "visual nutrition label for sustainability" on product packaging. Tracing the life of a product and its impact on global society and environment, this design enables consumers to understand the context of their products and empowers them to make choices that ensure the future of global social and environmental health.

Western consumers are often mentally and physically removed from the context of a product. Instilling a sense of how products connect to larger social and environmental issues can help consumers connect to issues in the backgrounds of their everyday purchases.

Background Stories (images are available on www.backgroundstories.com) demonstrate how a visually-compelling story can outline details of product ingredients. Data can be presented in an approachable, layered format alongside icons that provide cues to deeper depositories of product information that are publicly available online.

As a tool for transparency and consumer education, communications like Background Stories can increase consumer understanding on the intricacies of product backgrounds—which in the long run can lead to more socially and environmentally-responsible purchasing decisions.