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# EXCLUSIVE: Haelixa Taps Puma Supply Chain Vet for ‘Manufacturer-Centric’ Role

BY JASMIN MALIK CHUA     SEPTEMBER 22, 2025 10:00AM



IT WAS ANNE-LAURE DESCOURS WHO SUGGESTED THAT Haelixa RETRY A PREVIOUSLY UNSUCCESSFUL—AND PERHAPS TOO-EARLY—ATTEMPT TO COURT MANUFACTURERS, SINCE THEY’RE THE ONES THAT WILL HAVE TO INCORPORATE THE TECHNOLOGY INTO THEIR PROCESS. **PUMA**

When Gediminas Mikutis spun off [Haelixa](#) from his PhD work at ETH Zürich in 2016, it was with a singular goal: use DNA-marking technology to revolutionize supply chain [traceability](#).

But while the product is a “very good solution” for making sense of the complex tangle of commercial relationships that turn cotton into a T-shirt, cashmere into a sweater or silkworm cocoons into a scarf,

it wasn't being marketed well, admitted Patrick Strumpf, who replaced Mikutis as CEO in early 2024.

Enter Strumpf, who has founded three companies and sold two. With Mikutis continuing to finesse the science as its chief technology officer, Strumpf is free to fully lean into the commercial side of things. That includes bringing on [Puma](#)'s former chief sourcing officer as a board member to spearhead a new "manufacturer-centric strategy" that will boost not only Haelixa's profile but also its uptake.

It took Strumpf several attempts at sliding into Anne-Laure Descours's LinkedIn DMs—he asked a year ago, then six months ago, then three—before they got on the phone together. "You are persistent," Strumpf remembered her saying, while Descours said she was already familiar with Haelixa through interactions at Puma, where she remains as a sustainability advisor. She flew from Hong Kong to Zurich to meet the team. Gears started turning. In Haelixa, Descours saw something that set it apart from the raft of blockchain, barcode and biotagging platforms that promise companies that what they buy is [what they'll get](#).

"It's the simplicity, to be honest with you," Decours said. "I find it very simple to spray a solution that cannot be removed and ripped off and stays and stays for a hundred years. With the rest, I find them very complex to operate; you have to generate a lot of transactions, a lot of certifications, a lot of data."

"Simple" is also how Strumpf describes Haelixa, which uses what he says is a "tamper-free spray process" to apply unique, non-toxic synthetic DNA markers onto your raw material of choice. The result is something akin to a fingerprint, albeit one that cannot be copied or removed because of a silica-based encapsulation technique that can survive shredding, spinning, weaving, dyeing and harsh treatments.

"And the readout is done through a kind of PCR test, which we know all about from Covid," he said. "So you can take a swab from the material, analyze it in a PCR test, and then we are able to verify the DNA, first of all, and then its concentration, so we can see if it has been blended or not. At every production step, we can always say, 'Ah, we can find the DNA in the yarn. We can find it in the fabric and in the final garment.'"

Despite Strumpf's desire for greater growth, Haelixa has already worked with some of the industry's big guns, including C&A, Diesel, Hugo Boss and OVS. In August, Soorty, one of Pakistan's largest denim manufacturers, [doubled down](#) on using Haelixa to authenticate the recycled cotton in its Second Life collection.

From the outset, Haelixa tried to engage brands through their sustainability teams. In the end, however, it was the sourcing departments—and the "fully commercially driven" people within them, as Strumpf characterized them—that were calling the shots. They were the ones who were concerned that any green marketing claims weren't falling foul of [consumer protection laws](#). They were the ones

who wanted to ensure they were complying with incoming regulations around ecodesign. And, perhaps most of all, they were the ones who didn't want to be taken on a ride by less scrupulous actors, sacrificing their reputations in the process.

“I asked one of the sourcing executives, ‘Why, in the end, did you do it? You’re not having the biggest margins, so you are bringing on more cost,’” he said. “He said, ‘You know what? I want to get what I paid for. I’m paying 20 percent more for the organic cotton, but at the same time, I know I’m getting cheated. So now I’m paying you another 1 percent on top. So I’m paying 21 percent, but I now have confidence in what I’m getting, and that is a good deal for me.’”

Ultimately, all sustainability solutions must have a commercial value or they won't make it out of the pilot phase, Strumpf said. He knows this from experience.

“We had 50 pilots with almost every brand that you can think of,” he said. “But for many of these brands, it just stopped there. And the people in sustainability departments said, ‘This is great. I want to do it, but I cannot convince the commercial people. They don’t see the value.’ That’s when we realized we needed a better way of saying we are supporting sustainable sourcing. This is really about risk mitigation and return on investment.”

As a longtime sourcing manager herself, Descours knows how much of an issue counterfeiting is not only in fashion but just about every product category there is. Haelixa’s main focus is cotton, cashmere and silk, but it has also authenticated gemstones and precious metals.

“If you look at the luxury industry, it’s a big problem for them,” she said. “It’s a problem for the food industry. It’s a problem for the pharmaceutical industry. And what’s good about Haelixa is that it’s product agnostic. You can use it for more than just textiles.”

It was Descours who suggested that Haelixa retry a previously unsuccessful—and perhaps too-early—attempt to court manufacturers, since they’re the ones that will have to incorporate the technology into their process. They might be an easier sell, too, since they’ll be the first to shoulder to blame if something goes wrong. Right now, brands are more focused on how to get their products into the United States without a crushing tariff bill.

“I think going to manufacturers will very likely help the industry more than going to the brands and having them demand that their manufacturers use this technology,” she said. “And also, I think manufacturers need to be protected. Manufacturers need to be looked after, and they need to have the right tools to protect their business. And I think this is a great tool for them.”

With new rulemaking coming down the pike, traceability is becoming table stakes, “whether we like it or not,” Descours said. The challenge, however, is that brands haven’t evolved their thinking around sourcing to go along with it.

“I would say the old ones still behave in a certain way and are sort of handing over a lot of the responsibility to suppliers, but at the same time not really building long-term relationships,” she said. “So what is happening now with regulations, not just for traceability but also for decarbonization, for social labor and for everything else, all of this is becoming more and more visible. Complying with regulations today requires you to know what you are doing, which means you need to know your partners and you need to engage with your partners and collaborate to make sure you stay in business. It has to be ‘your problem is my problem.’”

But the idea is that Haelixa would bill only the brands on a per-garment basis. Strumpf said he’s keen to avoid the compounding price problem. Better that a brand push the cost of the DNA marking throughout the whole supply chain, thereby keeping prices low for everyone, than charge, say, a cotton mill that will double the price for the spinner that will double the price for the manufacturer.

Strumpf sees Haelixa not as the be-all end-all solution but as a node in an interoperable ecosystem. The company collaborates with the likes of [TextileGenesis](#) and [TrusTrace](#) to augment their digital technologies. In turn, they offer justification for where a physical solution might be needed to dispel any lingering shadow of doubt. It also works with on-the-ground partners like the [Organic Cotton Accelerator](#) because “they know the farmers and they conduct the audits,” he said. Haelixa doesn’t test if a fiber is organic or not, only that it comes from the source that a customer has specified.

“We are not expecting that brands will use physical tracers like us for their materials, but for the critical ones where we see a high degree of fraud, like cotton, cashmere and recycled, that is where we see strong demand,” he said. “But you need to first map your supply chain, then you know where you have problems. You cannot work with us if you have no clue.”

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