There is a saying: "Women—can't live with them, can't live without them", but in the case of the active and outdoor apparel markets women-specific wear is now an important area of growth as female participation in 'serious' sporting activities burgeons. Seeing the huge potential of this market, performance brands are now dedicating an ever larger share of their ranges to women, but developing and producing women-specific apparel is not as easy as some may believe as 'the fairer sex' is most definitely a difficult customer to please.

Power dressing women with feminine appeal

It is fair to say that women's perception of themselves and their position in society has changed quite drastically over the past few decades as they have achieved new heights in terms of their career prospects and their income. Although some believe that a 'glass ceiling' still exists in the world of employment, the vast majority of women in the 21st century have a great deal more freedom and expendable income than their 'foremothers' and this has transformed them into an important consumer group, which is arguably more powerful than that of their male counterparts when you consider that many females purchase apparel both for themselves and their male partners. But whilst some women may have been tarred, fairly or not, with a reputation for being 'shopaholics' the majority of women in the 21st century are, in fact, extremely discerning consumers who will not be 'fobbed off' with goods that do not match up to their high expectations.

Gone are the days when producing women's performance apparel merely involved down-grading the spec, lowering the price, making it smaller… and pink. Whilst many women in the 1980s may have been temporarily inspired to don leotards and leg warmers and sign up for an aerobics class, women today demand highly technical apparel which offers the performance required to participate in the demanding activities that they now undertake. Fortunately many brands have now realised that women participate in serious sports and want the right clothing to do it, in both in terms of fit and performance properties. This would not appear to be too difficult a task, but the added problem when it comes to women is that, on the whole, they still want to look as good, and as feminine, in this apparel as they would in everyday clothes—even if Lycra is involved—which is no mean feat. The plus side is that they are not as price-led as their male counterparts.



Ronhill is one of the companies now developing women- specific ranges.

Ronhill

In the pink

Surprisingly, although many brands have cottoned on to this idea, it appears that some brands are still stuck in the 'shrinking and pinking' mentality—a term coined for the gadget market to describe the rise in popularity of pink mobile phones, PDAs, MP3 players, etc. And whilst a few seasons ago there was a trend towards the 'girly' from a few technical clothing suppliers who found that these products were snapped up by women who wanted to look cute, this opened the doors for an avalanche of pink, flowers and general prettiness. However, the 'cute' trend still only worked when applied to clothing with credibility as women saw right through the plethora of cheap imitations. Whilst there is still a market for 'girly' products—a good example of this is the new athletic-inspired Pastry Footwear that includes styles such as Chocolate Mousse (brown with pink highlights) and Strawberry Shortcake (pink with white highlights), each of which is supplied with a coordinating tube of lip gloss—serious female sportswomen now want more understated apparel that suits the current fashions and their figures. Thanks to their increased income, they now buy sports and outdoor performance clothing the way they buy fashion—not because they need it, but because they want it—and it provides them with the functions they require. Furthermore, they want apparel that makes their thighs look slender and their waists look trim; apparel that isn't too bulky; and also garments that will stop them from perspiring too much or smelling 'sweaty'. Women want to look and smell as good when they're running as they do when they're meeting their friends for lunch i.e. fashionable and feminine.

This places a great deal of pressure on the apparel manufacturers as they have to become fashion forecasters as well as technical developers as women want outdoor and sports clothing that reflects the current trends. As jeans turned bootcut this was reflected in jazz pants; when metallics are in fashion this has to be mirrored in sportswear, and on it goes. Even more confusingly there are sub-trends within individual sports, for example, the latest fashion in mountain biking is for longer shorts. Women are certainly not an easy consumer group to please, but the brands that make it work best all do the same thing, they rework technical winners to keep them relevant and fresh without becoming too extreme. They maintain their classics, but add new fashionable colours and tweak the cut of their garments to reflect the latest fashion trends, whilst always maintaining their performance credentials.

And more companies are realising the demand and the potential for women-specific apparel. UK-based functional outdoor clothing company Páramo Directional Clothing Systems has gone as far as to name 2007 as the 'Year of the Woman' in recognition of the rising participation of female enthusiasts in all kinds of outdoor activities and professions. Starting with a choice of new ladies' base layers this spring, Páramo has added the Cambia long-sleeved reversible T-Shirt and Cambia Micro Shorts to its existing ranges specifically tailored for women and has taken on two more female designers to ensure that it can supply garments that meet the requirements of its female consumers in the UK and across Europe. The company's reversible shirts made from Nikwax Parameta S offer two shirts for the weight of one. Worn one way the garments provide warmth in cold conditions, whilst when reversed they offer cooling comfort in warmer conditions—making them suitable for year-round use. As they are also lightweight and non-bulky they can be used alone or as part of a layering system. In response to specific requests from customers, the company also plans to introduce women-specific high mountain and multi-activity garments this autumn. Commenting on its expanded line for women, Páramo designer, Jenny Forster, says, "From very early on, we had female-specific hill-walking jackets, trousers and base layers. This year's launches cater for the growing number of women participating in a wider range of outdoors activities—both for enjoyment and in a professional capacity."



Páramo's Cambia long-sleeved reversible T-Shirt and Micro shorts

Páramo Directional Clothing Systems

The fact that women 'need' performance apparel was long overlooked and this goes someway to explain the 'shrinking and pinking' mentality that existed. But modern women don't just 'want' functional apparel they often need it, not only in their leisure pursuits but also in their work. According to US-based workwear manufacturer Dickies, more than 50% of working women now work in non-office jobs in fields such as transportation, construction and manufacturing and these women require apparel to ensure their safety just as their male counterparts do. Nobody would expect a male worker to wear overalls that were too long in the leg or sleeve due to the safety risks involved,

but for a long time women working in manual industries had to wear clothing designed for men.

To cater for the women now working in these industries, Dickies has introduced a new line of professional workwear specially designed for women who need tough, durable work trousers, shirts, shorts and carpenter jeans. Features of the new range include industrial-laundry strength fabric and trim, racheting zipper sliders and reinforced pockets, waistbands and seams.

Girl power

Whilst many of the established men's brands have successfully incorporated women-specific lines into their ranges, there is a quiet revolution of smaller companies that now design and make apparel for women. Although these small brands don't have the advantages of volume to support their price points in the way that more mainstream companies do, they do have the flexibility to innovate in terms of style and fashion as well as technology. Brands such as US-based Terry Precision Cycling and the small but trendy Harlot Clothing both develop women-specific cycling apparel that reflects the current high street fashions. Harlot may seem a strange name to give to a company producing women-specific clothing as the term, meaning prostitute, appears unsuitable for a forward-thinking feminine enterprise. But this is exactly why the female founder chose it. In the late 19th century when women first started riding bicycles it was seen as 'unladylike' due to the body position and the need to alter the conservative dress code of the era, and it was therefore viewed as an activity of loose women or harlots. Long after the event, Harlot Clothing aims to dispel this theory by producing technical clothing for women cyclists that is both functional, cut to suit the female form, and feminine. As the company states on its website one of its aims is to "be sure that all Harlot clothing looks as good walking into the brewery for a post-ride celebration as it does on the bike".



Terry Precision Cycling's 'skort'.
Terry Precision Cycling

Made for women by women these brands understand what works and what doesn't in terms of cut and comfort. Both companies produce a women-specific chamois designed to fit women without being bulky and Terry Precision Cycling's 'skort'—a cycling short with a technical chamois that is totally covered by a fashionable skirt—offers technical performance hidden away in a fashionable, feminine garment.

Fickle fashions

Unfortunately, as fashion is fickle and trends can flop or fly, it's a hard thing to predict and when performance brands invest large sums of money in producing technical apparel that follows fashion, the risk is intensified. However, although there is still a gamble involved, the advantage that the industry has is that although they are astute consumers, women can still be influenced by the swathes of fashion magazines that convince them that a particular shade of yellow is the new black even if it doesn't really suit anyone. This is backed up by teams of merchandisers who all work their magic to make the product look good. But for all the advances



Odlo

Female figures

Women-specific apparel was a strong theme at many of the trade fairs last summer and this is only right when you consider the size of the female market in this area. European Outdoor in Friedrichshafen, Germany, revealed some interesting female statistics figures:

- Some 40% of climbers are now women.
- With nearly six million female enthusiasts, Nordic walking has long been dominated by women.
- In 2005 the German Alpine Association saw the number of female members rise by 7,000 to make up 38% of total membership.
- 70% of exhibitors surveyed at the show claimed they already had a women-specific collection in place.

Why macho marketing misses the mark with women

As is often the case with worthwhile developments in human achievement, Eurojersey came up with its Sensitive fabric partly by design, partly by accident.

The material owes its softness, stretchability, durability and breathability to a combination of the yarn the manufacturer uses—nylon (predominantly Meryl at the moment) and Lycra—and the construction process involved; the Lycra is knitted into the nylon.

The result is a fabric that, in the opinion of Eurojersey's UK manager, Andrew Martin, is particularly suited to making activewear for women.

"From an aesthetic point of view, it works exceptionally well," he explains. "This is a flat surface—it's almost like working with paper—so we can achieve real depth of colour, plus apply beautiful designs, all from the same fabric."

One company that is already making extensive use of Sensitive is USApro. This UK-based sportswear manufacturer (don't be fooled by the name) has traditionally had women's fitness, especially aerobics, as the core of its business, but it has expanded into tennis and is now becoming 'multi-sport'. It is launching what Martin calls "a high-tech, but still fashionable" collection for running and other outdoor activities.

Last year, a specialist women's sports clothing company named Sweaty Betty commissioned an exclusive (in the UK, at least) collection from USApro, which uses Sensitive. It sold the apparel online, at its own 30 bricks-and-mortar stores, and at the concessions it has at Selfridges in London and at a number of top-of-the-range fitness clubs. The whole collection sold out in a few months.

Because it is outside the UK, USApro arranged to sell the Sensitive-based designs at its own concessions in Galeries Lafayette and KarsadtQuelle in Germany, under its own 'elite' label. And towards the end of 2006, UK retailer John Lewis secured permission to launch its own version of the range, customising the colours and so on, for a one-off Christmas collection.

"USApro has fallen in love with the fabric," says Martin, "so it has started to put Sensitive into its mainstream range of clothing. It has found that its retail clients like what it is producing because it looks good, and because it is for women only."

He argues that, in sportswear, none of the big brands have really done more than "vaguely adapt" or "slightly amend" the fit of their garments for women. "They have nothing designed for women," he insists. "Those brands are brilliant at marketing, but I'm not so sure about their products."

And even that marketing seems to him to miss women out a lot of the time. It's aggressive: just think of some of the classic tag-lines they have used to build their reputations. There is what he calls "a macho philosophy" underpinning much of this, which can be off-putting for women.

Andrew Martin is in no doubt that the design, fit, colour-ranges, and the entire philosophy that USApro has come up with is much more in keeping with what women want.



Sweaty Betty

made in women's products if they are not presented well in the stores, i.e. garments crammed onto rails, all side facing so you can't see anything, male assistants, cliquey atmospheres, changing rooms without mirrors, or with the mirror out on the shop floor, female consumers will not feel comfortable buying this apparel. This could go some way to explain why many women are now flocking to the Internet to buy their sportswear. Specialist websites often offer the variety and choice that they can't get in-store, and as some, including Sweaty Betty and Minx Girl in the UK, offer one-to-one advice on the right products to buy for their individual sporting requirements and to suit their body shape, many women are moving away from the high street and into Cyber Space. If this sounds like a depressing prospect for 'bricks and mortar' shops it doesn't have to be. Offering personal advice and keeping to a smaller range of brands—so that the assistants can inform customers on the performance and suitability of the garments—will entice more women to shop at that store.

The secret to marketing technical apparel to women is that, whilst it should offer the same level of performance as men's garments, it should not look technical. Whilst some people may want to show off their designer branding to the world, serious sportswomen—for whom sport is an integral part of their lifestyle—want fashionable apparel that fits into their existing wardrobe but offers the functional performance they need.