Performance fabrics step into the light

We know that weight weighs on the minds of fabric manufacturers. It's a subject that appears to be of great importance as these companies decide on their research and development priorities. They want to make their materials lighter so that the brands and finished goods manufacturers they sell to can add the tag 'lightweight' to their marketing literature.

Here is a simple piece of proof. In the build-up to the European Outdoor exhibition this summer, a number of the biggest brands issued news releases on the products they intended to showcase at the event. Each member of this high-profile group—Helly Hansen, Jack Wolfskin, Gore, ARC'teryx, Salewa and Samsonite—made references to the light weight of their new ranges. German brand Eberhard Göbel even had a special lightweight umbrella on display.

On the face of it, this weight-loss challenge ought to be good news for fabric manufacturers that can keep finding ways to make their products lighter. Maglificio Ripa is an old hand at this game. It launched its 'Light' label in 2001 and, according to the company's calculations, light fabrics currently account for 50% of production at its manufacturing facility near Milan, with demand for them growing steadily.

Weights go as low as 105 grammes per square-metre for a product it calls Dryskin+, (on which it works in partnership with Dryarn and Dow XLA). Applications for it include sports underwear, with specialist undershirts for skiing a typical example. Maglificio Ripa also has 'Light' products that incorporate anti-abrasion, moisture management, ultraviolet protection and specialist stretch functionality.

Recently, and a little ambitiously, the company relaunched 'Light' as 'Light – The Only One'. The Italian company is certainly not the only one producing lightweight fabrics for outdoor brands. To give just one example, Pertex has also had light weight at the core of its strategy for years. Its lightest line is its Quantum series, for which it produces 12-, 15- and 20-denier fabric.

Pertex sales manager for the US, Barry Garlick, confirms that lightweight options are in intense demand. "Brands certainly want to have lighter fabric," he says. "It's what they talk to us about all the time. We released three new 15-denier products at the Outdoor Retailer exhibition in Salt Lake City in August and the interest from visitors was very high."



European Outdoor

Consumer demand

This, and the pre-event material at European Outdoor, may make you wonder if brands are taking on for themselves the job of convincing members of the buying public—and the retailers who have all the face-to-face contact with them—that fabric can keep becoming lighter without any compromise on performance. Not so, according to another of the leading names in the outdoor space, Berghaus.

"Actually we view this slightly differently," says Richard Cotter, brand president of the UK firm. "When we develop a range, we start by looking at what consumers want to get out of a product. Then we look for garments and components that have the right mix of attributes to deliver the consumer's requirements, whether these are aspirational or functional."

In his book, aspirational requirements, such as brand name, style or colour, can be every bit as important as functional technical aspects of a product, depending on the intensity of the activity people want to undertake.

Knowing what people are looking for, and finding or making a product that's right for them is, Mr Cotter says, what should drive any good consumer product brand. But it is far from easy to do this effectively, not least, he points out, because consumers are frequently unsure about exactly what it is they want. You have to be careful how you interpret consumer demand and feed your findings into expensive product development programmes.



Brands want to combine light weight material with high-level performance. The opportunity for fabric manufacturers that can combine both is "massive".

W.L.Gore