The world of ready-to-wear has never been more enthusiastic than it is now about performance textiles. This article presents the views of a number of influential fabric and fibre manufacturers in the performance space who remain firmly committed to the sports and outdoor market, but who are finding new avenues open to them thanks to interest in their products from major brands and retailers.

Performance meets ready-to-wear



The popularity of wellness centres is pushing new developments in performance textiles.

Big-name retailers have found that busy professional people are keen on suits that you can machine-wash, blouses that require no ironing, tailored trousers that stretch and retain their shape rather than sag. Weaving performance fabrics into their garments is the only way they have of achieving this.

It's also important for the companies competing fiercely for a share of shoppers' wallets always to have something new to offer. This is part of the Zara syndrome, the dramatic impact that the Spanish fashion manufacturer and retailer has had on the industry.

There was a time when clothes retailers contented themselves with two collections a year, each decided 20 months in advance when the buyers took a trip to Hong Kong and specified their requirements. For some big names, this practice continued into this century while, under their noses, Zara's super-fast turnover of products and styles was sparking a revolution.

Spurred by the knowledge that in-demand items will be quick to fly off the shelves in Zara stores and go out of stock, customers in some big Spanish cities have taken to forming a queue on order delivery day before the shops open, waiting to snap up the newest stock as soon as it leaves the truck. They've become known as 'las camioneras', or the lorry women.

Sales and profits at Zara's parent company, Inditex, keep going up (by 25% and 22% respectively in 2006), and the group's worldwide expansion continues, most notably this year with the opening of a first Zara store in Beijing's classy The Place shopping mall. It's no surprise, therefore, that other young fashion retail companies—Mango, H&M and New Look to name but three—have chosen to follow Zara's model rather than the old 20-month lead-time one. Nor is it any surprise that at a recent meeting with Australian Wool Innovation in London, buyers from Marks & Spencer had barely sat down before asking to see "whatever you've got that is new".

Often these days 'performance' seems to be the main source of innovation in the ready-to-wear arena. This has certainly been the experience of a number of fabric producers we've spoken to in recent weeks.

New fabric

In July, Eurojersey launched a new element to its Sensitive range of fabrics, Sensitive Life. Developed for use in swimwear and sports apparel, the new fabric provides even greater protection against chlorine in swimming pools and the minerals and salts found in thermal spas. Eurojersey says it can also boost sports performance through muscle and body support. Its sports and performance credentials are indisputable.

Eurojersey's UK country manager, Andrew Martin, says launching a new fabric is an unusual step for the company to take, but that the gap in the market was too big to ignore. It's a gap that has appeared as a result of the cross-over between sport and fashion. The market surrounding health clubs, spas and wellness is growing at a phenomenal rate, with more and more people even installing jacuzzis

in their homes. He points out that, while swimwear has had to cope with chlorine for a long time, the widespread use of jacuzzis adds heat and abrasion to the potential causes of damage to fabric.

Sensitive Life addresses this by offering 240 hours' resistance to chlorine, and greater resistance than previous Eurojersey fabrics to mineral salts; the company is also testing its ability to withstand sun-creams at the moment.

This makes Sensitive Life of interest to swimwear brands such as Speedo, for whom wellness and fashion is the fastest growing part of the business.

"This could be an important development for any swim brand," Mr Martin admits, "but wellbeing is a growing area for us anyway. We've looked at genuine sports applications such as cycling shorts and tops. Our classic fabric is possibly too light here, and our specialist sports product, Sensitive Power, too heavy. The new one is in between, but is still able to offer muscle support and compression, only without any restriction of movement."

Positive impression on customers

His expectation is that this will translate well into the world of ready-to-wear. Some brands have already chosen to make dresses and fitted trousers from the Power fabric, and it's an area in which Sensitive Life, with much the same performance qualities, only with less weight, should also be able to play an important role.

French fashion brand and retailer Marithé and François Girbaud, already a Eurojersey client, has built up a reputation for using innovative fabrics. The company has said that its use of Sensitive has made a positive impression on customers and it is now using the fabric in its Sports City suits, trousers, dresses and blouses.

Apart from the convenience of being able to wash these garments by machine, at low temperatures, and pack them in a case, unpack them and wear them without the need to iron them, today's consumers also put importance on the environmental benefits of these qualities. Machine-washing means there is no need for any dry-cleaning company to go to work on these garments with its arsenal of chemicals. The same performance characteristics mean they are items of clothing that dry quickly, so there's no need to switch on the tumble-dryer either. And even if it only takes a couple of minutes to iron a shirt, using only a little electricity each time, over the course of the life of the product, that too can add up to a substantial use of energy.

"All of this proves the important point that, aside from production, one of the biggest environmental issues we face is in the care of garments afterwards," Andrew Martin says. "That's why technical fabrics with these qualities provide a perfect cross-over between sport and ready-to-wear."



The new Zara store in Beijing.

Inditex

Country tastes

The European ready-to-wear manager for Advansa, Silvia Toledo, is in agreement, but says she notices differences in demand from fashion retailers for products such as Coolmax and Thermolite from country to country. Performance textile products like her company's are in demand in "niche markets", she says, but not across the whole of Europe. Not yet, anyway.

Marks & Spencer has been weaving Coolmax into its suits for several years to offer wearers extra comfort and, in the German market, brands such as Brax, Bugatti and Gardeur have followed this example, especially in men's trousers. "We've had good successes," says Ms Toledo, "but we have not made as much of an impression as we'd like in the wider ready-to-wear market. My feeling is that performance textiles are working well with a certain type of consumer: men and women who are not particularly young and who are looking for extra comfort."

Scandinavia is another receptive market for these changes, whereas Italy is not, in her opinion. She explains: "The Italian market is very fashionable, but it's also very 'classic', with garments being 100% cotton or 100% wool. Italian consumers don't like blends." France is also proving to be a tough battle for her, although she feels much closer to a breakthrough in Spain.

She agrees with Andrew Martin that new ranges of travel-wear seem particularly suited to the addition of technical fabric. This ties in with the customer profile she has identified: there is a new generation of retired people who are healthy, wealthy and hungry to travel. And they want to look good and feel comfortable every step of the way.





(left) Marks & Spencer now has a range of men's suits that are machine-washable.

(right) Manisaspor striker Reynaldo de Souza models the team's new Dry Touch shirt.

Marks & Spencer / Korteks

Silvia Toledo argues that fabrics such as Coolmax can add extra comfort to standard ready-to-wear products, giving denim jeans and chinos what she calls a "stay-fresh look and feel", even on a long journey.

As we reported in the May-June 2007 issue, combinations of Tencel and Coolmax have already appeared, with manufacturers targeting in particular the lighter end of the sports market—activities such as yoga or general fitness. According to Silvia Toledo, this is a development that also ought to be of interest in the ready-to-wear space.

"We do want to move this into ready-to-wear," she confirms. "Polo shirts are a pretty obvious example of what we could do with it, but I think it would also work well in garments to which brands want to give a more feminine touch, a more drapey feel, including women's trousers."

She warns, however, that it can take 18 months to go from "having the fibre idea to seeing something in the shops", and that wool developments are certain to take precedence over the possibilities with Tencel.

Top flight football

Another company that has taken its products from the world of sports to the world of ready-to-wear is Turkish textile manufacturer Korteks. It launched its performance polyester, Dry Touch, woven from fibre it manufactures itself, at Expofil in Paris in 2006 and has achieved some notable early wins with the product, which, it claims, dries three times faster than ordinary fabric, and offers the wearer advanced moisture management and temperature control functionality.

From the start of this football season, one of the teams in Turkey's top division, Manisaspor, has been wearing Dry Touch shirts, showing, at eleventh in the table, an improvement on last year's position (probably not exclusively because of the shirts, but you never know). The material has also gone into outdoor wear and swimwear, but of greatest interest for this article are the moves into what business development manager, Murat Sagdic, calls "everyday wear".

He says: "There's no question; winning the deal with Manisaspor has helped us. Even in the wider group Korteks belongs to [Zorlu Holding], which has tens of thousands of employees, some people didn't know who we were and this has raised our profile internally. More importantly, though, we've been able to make formal presentations to companies such as H&M and Marks & Spencer, as well as to several top sports brands."

His company's main objective in these meetings was to reinforce in the retailers the conviction that "polyester doesn't have to mean sweaty". However, the momentum has picked up more quickly than Korteks dared hope. H&M has expressed a serious interest in using Dry Touch in some of its fashion tops, for example.

Mr Sagdic confirms that his company recently delivered a 100-kilogramme sample of Dry Touch to a Marks & Spencer supplier and a similar amount to a company producing tops on behalf of Tommy Hilfiger.

It's normal, of course, for the yarn to go to the manufacturing partners that construct garments on these big companies' behalf and to their specifications. But part of the Korteks approach is to take care to offer the yarn only to manufacturers it believes will enhance rather than compromise the Dry Touch brand. At the moment, its programme of quality control includes random checks on finished goods.

This may become more difficult if the experiments these interested retailers are engaged in prove successful. But that would be a pleasant problem for Murat Sagdic to deal with. The transition from sport to ready-to-wear has been swift for his company, and he believes the cotton-like feel of Dry Touch is one of the reasons. When people feel how soft and pleasant it is, he argues, they want it "in their daily life".

Women's movement

Mr Sagdic insists that this is equally true for men, women and children. However, according to Ria Stern, the global brand director for Hyosung's elastane product, creora, the development we are examining here owes most to women.

She explains that she recently took part in a panel discussion at a conference as part of a team of seasoned industry professionals. One of the questions she and her fellow-panellists—"all of us with 20 or 30 years' experience"—had to answer concerned the greatest change they had witnessed during their years in textiles.

"I said it was the importance of women in the world of performance wear," she recalls, "and I honestly believe that it's this that has driven the marriage between performance and fashion."

She says she recognises another recent change, one that has taken place among younger consumers especially. "They are so tech-savvy anyway that it's only natural for them to want technology in their everyday clothes. They want to work out a little and then go straight to Starbucks to have coffee. They don't want to have to get changed. So they want antimicrobial functionality in the clothes they're wearing. They don't want to have to worry about odour."

At the same time, the catwalks are playing a part by bringing back leggings and "layering pieces", she insists. That means apparel manufacturers are, naturally, turning to micropolyester, elastane and other technical textile solutions. That brands can then choose to add particular performance qualities to these is a bonus.

And, yes, this does mean a big boost for the travel-wear collections retailers and brands are keener than ever to promote now. For Ms Stern personally, the most obvious benefits are the ones outlined above of busy people having to devote less time to the care of their clothes. As we have seen, this also sits well with the questions everyone is now asking about the environment.

Brands need to do something

However, as well as aftercare, the creora brand manager points to changes Hyosung has been able to make on the production side to improve the yarn's performance in this area. At the Interfilière exhibition in Lyon in September, the company launched a new series of blends of creora with sustainable fibres, including linen, modal and organic cotton.

Ms Stern's company has engineered the creora to be settable at a lower heat for these mixes resulting in a drop in energy-use during the production process of 15%. She says this new line, the creora Natural Fabric collection, is already proving popular with intimate apparel brands.

"These fabrics have a wonderful feel to them, so it's no surprise that they are now crossing from activewear into ready-to-wear," she continues. "And all these things are of benefit to brands. It's a way of calling out the benefits of the garment, of making sure it doesn't get lost among everything else that is on offer to consumers. Brands know they all need to do something."

The benefits are real. Ria Stern makes the point that they have to be. Brands have their own integrity to maintain and they know that if they fail to deliver on what they promise, consumers are unlikely to give them a second chance. That's why, if they want to endow their garments with new capabilities that are good for the consumer and good for the environment, they have to invest in the technology that performance textiles have to offer.



A fashion top from H&M's latest collection. The company has expressed an interest in using Dry Touch in garments like this.

Hennes & Mauritz