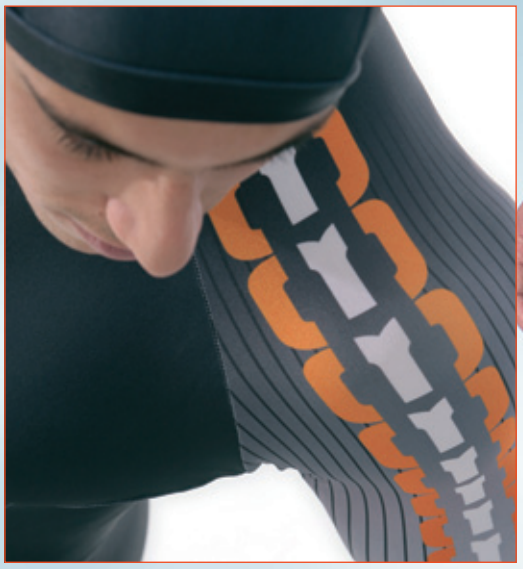
The list of forbidden substances that suppliers to the sports and outdoor market have to negotiate grows ever longer. But one company that positively welcomes each new restriction is reflective technology provider JRC Reflex.

Hard task master

It's not that the French company is exempt in any way from the demands of brands and apparel manufacturers: chief executive, Bernard Cugerone, accepts completely that a longer list of banned materials—the Levi Strauss Restricted Substances List, for example, now runs to 14 pages—can make life more difficult for everyone in the supply chain. That, however, is just how he likes it.

"There's no question: a huge book of forbidden substances makes it more difficult, but the more difficult the better," Mr Cugerone says. "If it's difficult, only the best can do it."

All right, so implicit in this remark is that he thinks his company is the best at what it does. This is very much in keeping with what most chief executives say about their businesses. Throw in the fact that Bernard Cugerone is the founder of JRC Reflex and you can understand why he makes the claim with the extra earnestness of one who cannot just walk away and find another job if things don't work out.



A new design for a bob-sleigh suit: even for reflective material, aesthetics are everything now.

adidas

He has a niche, the sports apparel market. He wants to stay in it and, yes, he believes his product offering is the best in the niche.

He began with sports shoes, an area he'd worked in for many years before setting JRC Reflex up, but sports shoes now represent only 5% of his market. Brands have gone off the PVC that traditional rolls of reflective material were made of, and want their shoes and, especially, their apparel to be PVC-free now. It may not feature on the lists of restricted substances, but companies and consumers are concerned about the impact on the environment of PVC production.

He has also done some work in the security market, but this is a market-segment that already has "very powerful players" in it, a reference to 3M.

"They must control 80% of the market," he says, "so we go where they won't go, sports, a market I know. It's small; there's no market for people like 3M. So while we cannot compete in safety, because they're too big and too good, this is where we have our opportunity and we intend to take it."

Glass bead game

Away from PVC, away from shoes, one of the principal areas he is concentrating on now is reflective material made with glass beads. He has developed products for piping, for woven fabric and, more recently, even for stretch fabric. JRC achieved this first in silver, but is now producing fluorescent additions for the biggest names in the business in the colours of their choosing: fuchsia pink, pistachio green, daffodil yellow—anything they want.

Mirroring the moves that have taken place on the global manufacturing landscape, 80% of what Mr Cugerone's company produces goes to factories in the Far East to be added there to branded garments for sectors such as running, cycling and outdoor wear.

More recent applications include luxury sports jackets by Willy Bogner that have gone on sale in top ski resorts such as St Moritz at a retail price of €2,000 each. The champion-skier-turned-fashion-designer's links to golf may now take JRC into that market too.

Apart from the colours, applications like these at the high end mean there is a requirement for the reflective tabs to be machine-washable and dry-cleanable too. Strict quality control is also essential.

Nevertheless, Mr Cugerone insists that lower cost competitors in Asia will be able to supply all of these qualities within the next few years. If he is to maintain his self-proclaimed status as the best in the niche, he has to keep innovating.

He himself calls his next idea "crazy", but the big brands seem to like it. It's piping in stretch material, reflective on both sides, with a bright colour along the edge. You see a line of bright orange, for example, along the extremity of the silver reflective material.

The top ten brands in the global sports apparel market are looking seriously at this, and some have already adopted it as a striking extra touch to garments such as outdoor climbing jackets, every stitch of them made in China except this reflective piping, which is as French as a bottle of Beaujolais Nouveau.

Dell model

One of the ways in which JRC Reflex is able to keep finding and funding these new ideas is that it takes a Dell approach to its order-to-cash cycle. In simple terms, that means customers pay up front,

which the global top ten sports brands don't always take to kindly.

"We've had a lot of criticism for this," Mr Cugerone continues, "because we really are talking here about the biggest companies, and we are tiny. But it's necessary, precisely because this is a niche market. We have to innovate all the time, we have to invent all the time and people try to copy everything we do. But if our customers pay up front, it also means we have to be perfect."

He believes the future holds further exciting possibilities, including perforated reflective material for brands to apply to breathable fabric, or screen printing onto the products. Aesthetics are "pushing everything" in today's sports apparel market, he observes. For this reason, he also envisages reflective products that are specifically for women, differentiated most obviously by colour.

He also wants to grow his company's presence in North America with a view to working more closely with the big sports companies there. "I haven't gone before," he says, "because I've always been too small." However, he believes firmly that if he continues to make what other companies don't want to make, size will cease to matter.



Reflective stretch fabric created from glass beads on polyamide and elastane and applied to piping.

JRC Reflex

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