BRAND PROFILE: LIJA

Canada-based LIJA has its roots in golf apparel but has found synergies in tennis and gymwear. CEO Linda Hipp explains how fusing comfort and fashion has proved a winning game plan, as the company takes a shot at the wider sportswear markets.

Putting fashion at the forefront

In the eye of the beholder? Only skin deep? Not quite there, but the new marketing campaign of Canadian golf apparel company LIJA is asking customers to think about what beauty means to them, and fill in the blank: 'Beautiful is _____'. In this case it's how the customer feels when she's out on the green, on the tennis court, at the yoga studio or in the gym.

"I want to inspire women to wear our product and play beautifully, and live healthy and active lifestyles," says the company's founder and CEO, Linda Hipp. She has built the brand from a purely golf-focused company, to branching into tennis, activewear and 'studio', achieving double-digit sales growth every year since launch. The key to success, she says, is finding a niche, being able to see what's missing from the market and fill that gap – which is how the company was originally established. Out on the greens in the late 1990s, it occurred to her that while the men's golfwear market felt almost saturated, it was decidedly difficult to find women's apparel that was stylish as well as comfortable.

"I quickly realised there was a gap in the market for golf apparel that was targeted towards a more youthful, style conscious woman. At the time, the largest segment of

What began life as a purely women's golf apparel-focused company has now branched into a range sports - but golfwear remains its core breadwinner.

Lija

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women golfers taking up the game was young professionals and I assumed there must be many others like me who were looking for more sleek, fashionable golf apparel," she says.

Within six months she had left her job as a business development executive and launched Hyp Golf. By the end of its first year in 1997 the collection made its way into 25 retailers in and around Vancouver. Although she hadn't any previous experience in fashion, "a marketing degree and a determined personality" helped her in the early years, where she took on a jack-of-all-trades role, including sole designer. "My father is an entrepreneur and I knew one day that I would follow the same path," she says – and a vision of the lines' direction with herself as the typical customer helped shape the look.

In 1999, Hyp Golf entered the US market and soon after caught the attention of the golf media. Jill McGill joined Pearl Sinn along with a number of players over the next eight years to wear Hyp Golf on the LPGA tour.

By 2004 it became apparent that the brand could be widened, and cater to other sports. The name was changed to LIJA (a play on 'leisure') and staff numbers were increased. It was that year the brand won the first of four mentions in 'Canada's fastest growing companies' list in Profit magazine, a Canadian business title; the company has also been named Canadian Golf Company of the Year and Ms Hipp awarded Executive of the Year by Golf Score magazine, among other accolades.

To celebrate its 10 year anniversary, Ms Hipp took the staff of 15 to Las Vegas to commemorate the occasion and that year the company opened its first US warehouse and started overseas production on some product lines. The following year, it established its first Leisure collection, followed by active and tennis collections, whose lines were quickly doubled following a "very successful introductory year".

Fashion focus

She continues, "As we grew, so did our design team. Today, I am the creative director so I provide inspiration and direction for the season and approve all designs. We have a fantastic product development team that does the rest. We start from a fashion standpoint and then make sure all the functionalities are there. I go through every runway show each season and try to find something that pulls me in."

One of the big looks on the catwalks in recent months has been 'luxe sportswear', with designers from DKNY and Lanvin to Kenzo and Stella McCartney combining casual styling with mesh, fluorescents and silk – an idea that has influenced LIJA's designs from the offset.

"We all have such busy lives these days so it makes sense that designers would work towards creating product that gives more freedom of movement but still keep us looking fashionable and beautiful. Our primary focus in design is to push the boundaries in active apparel by fusing fashion with sport."



Canadian tennis player Rebecca Marino, one of the top 40 women players in the world, says, "When you look good, you feel good; when you feel good, you play well."

Lija

Not veering too far away from functionality, outerwear lines have included a soft-shell jacket. "We felt there was something missing in the marketplace in terms of offering a functional jacket – we didn't see anything that was very feminine. The outside is 100% polyester woven fabric so its breathable, wind resistant and water repellent and the inside is bonded with a microfleece so its very cosy, lightweight and dry."

Down to a tee

While by no means a novel marketing technique, one of the growth drivers of the company has been its use of 'endorsers'. "We are looking for women who believe in our philosophy of pursuing a healthy and active lifestyle," says Ms Hipp.

One such endorser is Canadian tennis player Rebecca Marino, who has worked with the company on an eponymous collection, which includes tops, dresses and skorts. "We worked with Rebecca at the beginning to really understand her personality and what types of

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Technical fabrics that work as hard as the wearer

Sourcing the most innovative technical fabrics is high on the agenda. "Function is key in determining our fabric selections," explains LIJA founder Linda Hipp. "Our women are very active so we need to ensure our product offers not only a beautiful silhouette but all the functional elements required for each sport. Each season we visit our primary fabric suppliers, travel to fabric shows and read *WSA*."

In 2004 the company was awarded the Polartec APEX award for innovative use of technical fabrics. The fabric in question, Powershield, is bonded, abrasion and wind resistant and brushed back. While that particular version is no longer used, the company focuses on six main technical features: moisture wicking, quick drying, stretch, compact, wind resistance and water resistance.

"The latter two are being used extensively in our new outerwear line, designed and developed initially for our UK market, and which is being launched in fall 2013," says Rhia Bachynski, brand coordinator. "In our search for superior fabrics, it is critical that we offer pieces with a beautiful, luxurious hand-feel. Each LIJA piece must feel luxurious to wear but also stand up to the demands of sport."

pieces she likes to wear. She loves a sleek, sporty silhouette so many of her pieces reflect that sense of style."

As well as being worn by professional sportswomen, the brand has a network of 'influencers' and ambassadors – businesswomen and instructors who feed back ideas, and spread the word. "Being on the front lines, so to speak, they are able to influence many women in their daily activities. We find that when people take lessons or belong to groups, they often look for direction with product or tools that the influencers use. With that in mind, we felt it was a great opportunity to support these individuals and also help in growing our brand," adds Ms Hipp.

LIJA's growth continues, with yoga and running collections added in 2012, additions to all lines launching in spring 2013, and by the autumn, a branch into outerwear. This will involve more technical fabrics, and will be designed to match the tennis, golf and running lines. The company is also planning a physical expansion, with products now available in Ireland, Spain, South Africa, UAE and Australia.

"It's been a really tough time in the industry but we've made it through probably better than most companies out there; just imagine what our company's going be like when the economy gets back on track," adds Ms Hipp. "We're always looking to increase our product offerings so as we look towards spring '14, there may be a few new things up our sleeve."