A new and distinct clothing category could boost revenues for outdoor brands and retailers.

Lifestyle layer can be new outdoor apparel category

New Jersey-based textile resource and garment production specialist Concept III used its presence at industry exhibitions at the start of 2013 to suggest a new idea, the "lifestyle layer", as a new category of garment. It is open to suggestions of a better name, but insists that "comfortable but unique" pieces of clothing, not primarily for next-to-skin wear, but not for outerwear either most of the time, deserve to be in a category of their own. A lifestyle layer piece is one that is versatile, lightweight and "intermediate". Because it's likely wearers will want to keep it on all day, it should also look stylish.

Continuing the explanation of its vision, Concept III says a lifestyle layer garment would be one you might wear in place of a sweater, one that is "inspired by outdoor and active performance fabrics" (even if you only wear it to go to work) and offers all-day comfort.

Life with layers

For the last 15 years, people throughout the outdoor industry have been talking about layering, so that now enthusiasts of almost every activity use layers to regulate comfort as



Stylish and colourful "outdoors-inspired" garments such as the Oasis long-sleeve top from Icebreaker can be part of a whole new garment category.

Icebreaker

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the ambient temperature and heat generated by the body as a hike or climb or run progresses rise and fall. Underwear, then T-shirt, then fleece, then ski jacket… we are used to building layers up and discarding them one by one as we become warmer and reapplying them one by one as cool down.

Concept III believes garment manufacturers are now able to consider this new layer and it took fabrics and design concept garments to Outdoor Retailer Winter Market in Salt Lake City, the SnowSports Industries America (SIA) show in Denver and ispo in Munich in the first weeks of 2013 to show visitors what lifestyle layer fabrics and garments look like.

"Fashion and lifestyle are more important to the industry now," explains founder, David Parkes. "Popular outdoor brands, including Patagonia, The North Face, Arc'teryx and lots of others are moving that way. We feel each layer has its own personality and the lifestyle layer is no different. Layers need to look good; each has to have its own recognition, its own place and to be able to stand on its own. Layers used just to be functional, but now they all have to be acceptable for being on display in public."

Garment possibilities

Examples he offers are fleece gilets or half-zip jackets that people in the northern-hemisphere winter of 2013 appear happy to wear around the office all day. Other possibilities are featherweight, fitted, stretch down vests, flyaway travel jackets in merino-Tencel blends and light stretch fleeces with, perhaps, an unusual texture or colour. David Parkes says he is seeing "renewed interest in revitalised fleece and fleece textures" as, possibly, the next big thing in the market at the moment. These garments have to be attractive and stylish without any compromise on performance. Consumers will check the weather forecast and make a judgement on the layers they will need to stay warm in a climate that can vary greatly and still look presentable.

Warmth not weight

Consumers will continue to prefer lightweight garments for all layers, David Parkes says, unless we have a dramatic change to recent weather patterns. Natural fibres, particularly merino wool, which he feels is still "in the ascendancy" can play a part. "It's very different to 20 years ago," Mr Parkes continues. "We now have very fine yarns, 18.5 micron for example, that companies can use to make lightweight but relatively dense knits and wovens. These materials offer good insulation and all the natural antimicrobial and thermo-regulating qualities of merino. Merino garments are generating more and more interest, particularly in Europe, although the romance with wool in the US is also stronger now than it was a few years ago." He likes the combinations of merino with Tencel and Modal yarns because these enhance the hand of the fabric. "The yarns work well together from an aesthetic standpoint," he says. "They enjoy being together."



Lifestyle layer means clothing that offers all-day comfort.

Zimtstern

The fabrics and design concept garments Concept III assembled for the first showings received a very good reception, he says. Companies he describes as "big customers" took a close look. "They said we had put our finger on this," Mr Parkes continues, "that we are right about it. So we need to continue our communication about this to the market and talk it up. We've highlighted something we feel is a trend, something the industry should pursue." A new garment category, after all, means a new area in which to try to achieve growth in sales and market share.

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