



Adidas first teamed up with fashion designer Stella McCartney eight years ago, and the collaboration has evolved into an integral part of the brand.



'Lifestyle' clothing has become the next big category across the board in apparel. Combining functionality with fashion, sportswear characteristics such as breathability are infiltrating high-end fashion, forcing brands to reassess the balance between function and form.

Form versus function

When Puma launched its After Hours Athlete marketing campaign in August 2010, the brand was tapping into a trend that would become huge in 2011. The television advertisement challenged the brand's competitors by focussing not on mainstream sporting activities but on night-time 'athletes' playing pool, table football and karaoke. The implication was that, while Puma is a sportswear brand worn by the likes of Usain Bolt, the so-called after-hours athletes choose to wear Puma products for their functionality and fashion appeal. Puma CEO Franz Koch recently said that around two-thirds of the brand's sales are in fashion and lifestyle, with only 35% in sports products. "Puma therefore has invented a combination of sports and lifestyle and created an entirely new segment," he said.

Top brands such as adidas and Nike have long been considered lifestyle and fashion brands as much as they are sportswear brands, but now fashion houses are starting to add performance features to their apparel in order to appeal to the style-conscious consumer who also wants a t-shirt with good wickability. While in the past the pipeline from luxury fashion on the runway to performance wear in the sportswear market was largely one-way, the newly popular 'lifestyle' clothing category is altering the balance between fashion and sport.

Research firm NPD Group states that around 80% of activewear is used for non-sports activities. Similarly, industry research organisation SportsOneSource stated in 2011 that 85% of athletic footwear is used for activities other than the one for which it was created.

Greg Thomsen, managing director of adidas Outdoor USA, told the Associated Press in December that he believes those who were teenagers in the last decade have become more discerning and knowledgeable when it comes to the functionality of clothing. They won't want to give up the performance they have in their athletic-heavy wardrobe just because they're graduating to a different lifestyle, he said. "There's a new generation which has grown up with performance-oriented fabrics," Mr Thomsen said. "They know about fleece and they know about wicking. They know it's a step up in performance from cotton and wool."



Swiss outdoor brand Zimtstern successfully combines fashionable clothing with performance and functionality.

 Zimtstern

Baselayer garments lead the way

Will Manzer, CEO of Eastern Mountain Sports, recently told US media that wicking garments – shirts, in particular – are leading the way in the lifestyle category. "The relationship of form, function and fashion has always been given lip service but now it's a dramatic trend," he said. "Design is driving the aesthetic, but function is a part of the aesthetic, too. Things that are waterproof, slim and streamlined all look very cool."

The Outdoor Climalite top by adidas is a functional wicking baselayer garment made of 100% polyester. The under layer item, which has been popular with skiers, hikers and runners over the last few years, is now becoming increasingly popular with office workers and urban dwellers. Because the garment draws out perspiration, serves as insulation and keeps the wearer's body temperature stable, it is being worn for non-sports activities as much as for sports activities.

When Japanese fashion retailer Uniqlo launched its Heattech baselayer products in 2003, it expected them to do well with city dwellers. US CEO Shin Odake says that the urban market was a big part of the equation in

the development of the products.

HeatTech came about through a partnership between Uniqlo and fibre manufacturer Toray. The insulating fabric is made from fibre mixes based on a specially designed hollow fibre thread that Toray says captures "little pillows of warm air", insulating the body in the same way a heavier material such as wool would. The mix includes rayon and absorbs the moisture generated by the body and converts it into heat. Milk protein, containing natural amino acids, has been mixed with the fibres to ensure the fabric made from them is smooth and soft to the touch.

Uniqlo says 200 million Heattech garments have been sold worldwide since 2003, ranging from the tops that fit under suits to leggings and tights worn on their own. "Heattech allows people to stay warm in very cold weather without the hassle of bulky clothing which appeals to urbanites who are always on the move and cannot allow cold weather to slow them down," Mr Odake says.

Sports brands aim for fashion

US sportswear brand Under Armour has been venturing away from its staple sportswear offerings of t-shirts, shorts and other athletic apparel and expanding its collections with zebra-print leggings for women and t-shirts with catchy, fashionable slogans. In recent years, the 15-year-old company has been facing pressure to keep its product fresh, and has responded by recruiting graduates from top design schools in the US and taking more fashion risks. The brand's current look-book into 2012 features gym bags that look like designer purses and colourful vests that could be worn for jogging or a trip to the shops. Under Armour officials say the growing focus on fashion is part of the company's strategy to stay ahead of the competition, but emphasise that performance is still its number one goal. Indeed, the senior creative director of women's and youth apparel at the company insisted the brand would "never compromise the performance aspect of what we offer".

Under Armour could be attempting to follow in the footsteps of rival brand adidas, which teamed up with UK designer Stella McCartney in 2004 to create a range that was both functional and trend-setting. The resulting collections include running, yoga and tennis outfits which get as much attention in sports media outlets as they do in fashion magazines.

Finding the balance

One outdoor company that seems to be straddling the form versus function issue reasonably well is Swiss brand Zimtstern. Working with Sympatex, the brand uses fabrics of between 15 and 20 m water column head and between 15,000 and 20,000g/m²/24h

breathability (the amount of water vapour in grammes that can pass through a square metre of fabric during a 24-hour period), to create snow apparel that functions on the slopes and looks good on the street.

As the balance between function and form tips, the boundary of where sportswear ends and fashion begins is becoming unclear. What is clear is that fashion brands will have to create more functional clothing in order to compete, while sportswear brands will have to perform a juggling act of continuing to innovate while keeping up-to-date with aesthetic trends.



Uniqlo's Heattech garments were originally aimed at city dwellers and fashion-conscious office workers but offering performance more usually associated with sportswear.

 Uniqlo