BRAND PROFILE: ROHAN

UK outdoor company Rohan is celebrating its 40th birthday this year and continues to create clothing which appeals to its loyal customer base.

"Everything you need"

A marketer for US sportswear brand Nike recently suggested that traditional advertising ventures are becoming less valuable to companies, saying that "once you have established a direct relationship with a consumer, you don't need to advertise to them". This is a sentiment that surely rings true for British outdoor brand, Rohan. Since its early days in the 1970s, Rohan has sought to cultivate a loyal customer base through the use of catalogues, newsletters and sales discounts. Members of the Rohan 'community' receive early notification of sales, discounts, new products and store openings. Such marketing activities are now common practice for many brands, but Andy Manning at Rohan believes this home-grown customer base is the key reason for the brand's ongoing success. "We have a very loyal customer base across the country which has supported us at a time when our marketing and advertising budgets have been reduced," he says.

The company was founded by Paul and Sarah Howcroft in Skipton, North Yorkshire, in 1972, as the couple felt there weren't enough specific garments available for outdoor pursuits. Both were keen walkers and climbers, and felt that the outdoor gear available at the time was "rudimentary and hadn't changed in years," according to Ms Howcroft. The brand started out as a mail order only company and its first piece of clothing was a pair of lightweight, water-resistant salopettes. A few years later in 1978, a Rohan jacket was worn at the summit of Mount Everest. Austrian alpinist Peter Habeler was part of the first team to complete the climb without bottled oxygen and chose the 'Rohan Gwaihir Jacket' to keep the elements out on his ascent. At the time, Rohan claimed it had created the first wind and shower-proof breeches, made of a polyester/cotton blend. Its 'Windlord' fabric was claimed to be the first iceproof, windproof and breathable fabric.



Rohan's Elite Stormer Jacket is a lightweight waterproof jacket designed to offer cyclists protection from the elements.
Rohan

By 1982, the company launched its 'Dryline' insulating garments which featured a thick layer of towelling inside a poly/cotton shell. It also released its travel jackets with Gore-Tex, called 'City Slickers'. The following year, the Howcrofts opened the first Rohan store in Long Preston, North Yorkshire and



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launched Tu Quo Que (referred to as TQQ), a magazine which was "an attempt at meaningful communication between ourselves and our customers".

Although TQQ magazine no longer exists, the sense of community among Rohan customers remains, and is something close to the heart of Ms Howcroft, who left the company in the 1980s but returned in 2008 to manage its online community website, Rohantime. The website provides a forum in which Rohan customers can discuss their thoughts about Rohan products, as well as read up on the brand's latest news and explore its archives which document the last 40 years.

In 1985, Rohan moved its headquarters to Milton Keynes, some 80km north of London. The years that followed were difficult for Rohan, which was hit by 1987's Black Wednesday, and in 1988 UK-based footwear company C&J Clark bought a controlling interest in the brand.

Strength to strength

Today, Rohan has 61 stores in the UK and an annual turnover of approximately £30 million. The brand is celebrating its 40th year and is going from strength to strength, with a number of company-owned stores as well as several franchises. True to the brand's spirit of adventure, the stores are located not in shopping precincts and city centres, but places people visit as relaxed tourists. The list of store locations features some of the most beautiful towns in the country, and numerous places that have a reputation for outdoor pursuits, such as Keswick in the Lake District and Dunster in Somerset.

With a well established presence in the UK, the brand is now eyeing up the US. "We're treading carefully, trying to expand to the US," says Mr Manning. "We have a US website which is doing well and the ideal situation would be that it would lead to shops."

The Rohan clothing range includes everything from jackets and trousers to baselayers and socks, for both men and women, as well as a range of equipment designed and produced in-house (it used to be provided by luggage brand Eagle Creek). Rohan uses its own waterproofing technology called Barricade, a membrane featured in its waterproof clothing and footwear. Anti-odour silver technology is also used in footwear and underwear, to prevent odours.

The warehouse production and distribution is based in Milton Keynes, where there are approximately 100 employees. Manufacturing is done in East Asia, where the brand "works hard to make sure the conditions are right for workers," according to Mr Manning. As a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), Rohan follows its base code regarding factory workers and its relationships with suppliers.

On your bike

The latest range of clothing launched by Rohan is its cycling collection. Rohan last created a cycling-specific range in 1994, and much has changed since then in terms of apparel technology. The 'Rider' range features lightweight materials and wicking polyester/elastane blend fabrics, as well as UV protection and anti-odour technology. The clothing includes quirky design details such as reflective panels on the jackets, which are white on the front and red on the back to mimic car headlights. An innovative product to come out of the range is the 'Bumper Liner', a padded strip for use as an alternative to wearing padded shorts or trousers while cycling. The inner is made from a blend of polyester and elastane with Rohan's wicking 'Dynamic Moisture Control' finish and anti-odour silver technology. The padding is constructed from seamless, dual-density, open cell foam polyester that the company engineered to offer a high level of impact absorption and recovery, while the outer, designed to hold the Bumper Liner in place, is made from polyamide and elastane with high-friction silicone grips.

On its website, Rohan says that it "appeals most to those that have chosen not to run in the latest consumer race". "Everything you need may not sound quite as rock 'n' roll as anything you want but it's the only starting point we understand," it reads. Its timeless clothing reflects this, as it is not the most fashionable but it is, above all else, practical. "We feel that the brand is doing something aesthetically right, and the clothes do what they say they will do," says Mr Manning. "We don't have a large range, but we have jackets that do everything you need them to and that fit whatever activity they were designed for."



The Bumper Liner is an innovative padded piece that offers comfort and protection to cyclists.

Rohan

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