

From the time you picked up this magazine to the time you happened upon this article, odds are that the stock market stumbled by a percentage point or two, and several currencies juggled their relative value multiple times. Such is the state of the global economy at the moment: erratic, worrying, and tight. People are tearing up their credit cards and counting their pennies (and yen and rubles). As a result, budget retailers and purveyors of necessities are ushering in new crowds, while the once elite are feeling suddenly quite lonely.

Life at the high end

by Shari Shallard

How, then, are the higher end players in the vast performance apparel market expected to survive? What will cause a consumer to jog past a €12 running jacket from Aldi, and into the arms of an €70 running jacket from Under Armour? For performance apparel companies whose prices tend to hover around or even slightly above those of Nike, Reebok and friends—but without the omnipresence and marketing might of those megabrands—distinguishing one brand from its more affordable competitors is vital.

Distinction, in the cases of Under Armour, The North Face and Patagonia, means putting forth products that go beyond looking good and performing well. Whether it's individuality, belonging or conscientiousness – successful apparel must project a message of which its wearer can be proud.

The product looks good

Of course, going beyond means first making sure the basics are in place – which means looking good. “I have Patagonia clothing that was purchased in the early nineties that still passes my wife’s style check,” says Robert Murphy, a former member of the US National Wildwater Kayaking Team. “My black R2 jacket has been stuffed in the hatch of a sea kayak, worn on backpacking trips and is conservative enough to fit in with business casual clothes.” For a kayaker who nine-to-fives as a data architect, such versatility is a key selling point.

In a recent *Women's Health* magazine item on “upcoming trends to keep you looking your best when you are getting in shape,” Patagonia’s wool performance baselayer and a lightweight wool t-shirt, as well as The North Face’s Rucky Chucky running shoes, earned spots on the brief list of good-looking indoor apparel.

Indeed, these are lovely pieces. Made from 4.4 ounce merino wool with extra-fine-gauge yarn, Patagonia’s wool baselayer is a high t-neck



top that is both practical and chic. The North Face’s Rucky Chucky running shoes are engineered to withstand long distances under a variety of conditions and terrain; yet its tough construction is softened by the multicoloured geometric shapes covering its exterior.

Arguably, Under Armour apparel looks only as good as the body under the armour. Primarily compression wear that serves as a second (and more effective) skin, the blends used typically include polyester, elastane and nylon. The result is sleek, simple designs that hug and reveal the form underneath. One UA television advertisement featuring attractive American soccer player Heather Mitts (one of sports entertainment company ESPN’s “hottest athletes”), demonstrates that – on the right person – Under Armour can be downright sexy.

The product is good

Just ask the guy who’s waiting out an ice storm in a cave, counting on his climbing jacket to stave off frostbite – technology matters. The North Face website’s R&D section identifies and explains each of the fifty-plus technologies currently employed within the company’s apparel and equipment. The magic behind The North Face’s famous seam, for example, is explained in affectionate details: [*Fabric*] is hot cut and the seams are welded edge to edge [*and*] soft, flexible seam tape has been applied along the welded seams, the website reads, [*The*]

The North Face’s Rucky Chucky shoe was recently voted by a woman’s magazine to exhibit solid performance and style.

 The North Face

*Born on the American
football field, Under
Armour apparel is now
found on men and
women of all sports.*

Under Armour



elimination of traditional double stitching... improves comfort and eliminates stitch holes. That means the elimination of sneaky water molecules, thus giving new meaning to the word 'waterproof'.

The complexity of Patagonia's technology lies in its objectives: the twin goals of creating excellent apparel and protecting the resources involved in doing so. Its Gladiodor technology, for instance, manages to provide natural odour control through the use of naturally derived amino acid chains; this is in stark contrast to the industry norm of using heavy-metal ions to kill odour-causing bacteria. Patagonia's final products hold their own against the elements, while taking it easy on the environment.

Fans of Under Armour appreciate the brand's attention to subtleties, according to Jed Jecelin, senior brand manager. The popular ColdGear Mock top, for example, is "a result of the product's engineering and innovation. UA ColdGear fits better, feels better, and works better," he says, "[because] we focus on every detail." The top, he says, offers maximum stretch and recovery, is brushed with a soft inner face that contains warmth, has a sleek outer face allowing mobility beneath additional layers, and "achieves the impossible by keeping athletes warm, dry, and light with a single base layer".

All performance apparel brands make their own claims to unimaginably advanced clothing; looking good and performing well are descriptors assignable to almost any successful line of performance apparel. Consequently, it is actually in the intangibles that true distinction lies.

The product is a status symbol

Under Armour finds strength in its bellwether status. This self-proclaimed originator of performance apparel now manufactures a wide variety of performance apparel, but the line was originally created to be worn underneath uniforms or sports pads. More than a decade ago, the company's founder (and former player of American football) Kevin Plank found that while cotton t-shirts absorb sweat, a polyester blend wicked perspiration off the skin: a concept now considered elementary, but one which, at the time, was like discovering penicillin for sports.

Jed Jecelin, Under Armour's senior brand manager, points to this breakthrough as the start of the performance apparel market. "The movement from cotton to performance fabrics is getting stronger every day, and that all started with Under Armour," he claims. "We view our role as being the pioneer of the entire industry, and the continual leader of it. Athletes understand Under Armour's authenticity."

Of course, being able to say "We started this thing" (as Under Armour's website states), is no guarantee of one's sustained popularity –



Under Armour's ColdGear Mock is a single baselayer designed to keep athletes warm, dry and light.

 Under Armour

especially with a product whose key conquests include sweaty backs and bums. Yet, with disciplined product development, Under Armour has established itself as king of grid iron clothing – while achieving credibility among athletes of other sports.

Conversely, while Under Armour's is distinguished by its mastery of the basics, The North Face and Patagonia ride on the extreme edges of the sporting world. On most sports apparel websites' 'shop by sport' menus, options range from baseball to yoga, with running and soccer somewhere in the middle. The same drop-down menu on the Patagonia site has visitors choosing between climbing the Alps and surfing the Pacific. The North Face sports menu offers "Endurance" as an option, and is illustrated by a determined threesome running across a desert.

In truth, not everybody who shops these lines is packing for a trip to Mount Everest. Regular people walk their dogs in North Face Gortex-lined jackets and pull roomy t-shirts over their Under Armour tops. Tim Rhone, a spokesperson for Patagonia, admits that many of their customers are simply "people who are looking for everyday sportswear that is made responsibly". But these brands also know that status is about whom consumers think is buying a product, rather than who is actually buying it.

The brand is more than the product

In fact, Patagonia's status could have taken a knock last year, when the then-Republican-vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin referred to the brand as one of her favorite designers. To put it in other terms, Governor Palin, the winner of the 2008 Rubber Dodo Award (which is presented to the individual who has done the most to drive endangered species towards extinction), was



The environmental impact of Patagonia's R2 jacket is to be analysed in this spring's Footprint Chronicles.

Patagonia

singing the praises of Patagonia, the 2008 Eco Brand of the Year (which kind of speaks for itself).

This was quite an ironic plug for a company whose mission statement is "to make the best quality product, cause no unnecessary harm and use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis". It's easy to see why Patagonia was eager to distance itself from Ms Palin's comments. "We'd like to point out that Patagonia's environmental ethics greatly differ from Sarah Palin's," says Jen Rapp, director of communications for Patagonia. "While Sarah Palin may enjoy wearing our clothing, we'd prefer it if she enjoyed preserving the planet."

In fact, the company is willing to lose a sale if it means saving the planet. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Footprint Chronicles—the "most important aspect of our website," says Ms Rapp. "We're the only company in the US to publicly illustrate the environmental and social footprint of individual products."

To do this, Patagonia outlines the environmental impact of fifteen products; for example, a consumer may find that ten times a garment's weight was produced in CO₂ emissions during the manufacturing process. "When you place these figures in front of individuals," says Ms Rapp, "better decisions are made." While the wider retail sector is typically known to invoke impulse buys, Patagonia tries to talk its customers out of buying too much. The result: an unprecedented level of shopper trust and loyalty.

The North Face evokes a comparable loyalty through embracing the kinship of its consumers; its website is a resource for outdoor enthusiasts seeking events, news, history and camaraderie. Buried in the About Us section of its website is a timeline chronicling not only the last four decades of company milestones, but impressive cold, wet and slippery athletic undertakings. Elsewhere on the site, visitors are invited to share in extreme missions across the globe via an RSS feed. The team will attempt to climb and ski/snowboard

Gasherbrum II, also known as K4, the 13th highest mountain, in the world, reads one option, through live dispatches and video blogs, you will be able to witness an incredible summit.

Distinction comes when a brand is about more than just the clothes; necessarily, its website – and all of the company's components – must be about more than just shopping.

Why pay more?

Distinction isn't cheap. "Under Armour products live at the higher end of the price spectrum," admits Mr Jecelin. "The research, development, fabrics, materials, engineering and production that go into our products are intense and innovative." Nonetheless, he reiterates the company's motto to make all athletes better through passion, science, and the relentless pursuit of innovation. "We take that very seriously [and] offer products at various price points to meet the needs of different types of athletes."

Not everyone feels driven to accommodate a struggling market. Patagonia has faith that this is a climate in which it can continue to succeed. "As general environmental awareness in the mainstream has grown," says Mr Rhone, "our continued effort in using environmentally friendlier materials has enabled us to...gain new core customers who are interested in purchasing high performance outdoor gear from a company with a conscience."

Robert Murphy agrees. "I don't mind spending a few extra dollars knowing that the jacket I buy or the PFD [personal flotation device] that I wear will not need to be replaced anytime soon," he says. "In a throw-away society, it is nice to know your gear will not end up in a landfill a few years down the road."

Each of these companies are conventional enough to keep besotted customers coming back to the brand, and distinct enough to make the brand truly resonate with the customer—customers who will see a brand through its economically fragile days. Distinction is why some consumers turn to The North Face website instead of cable news to check in on an Arctic expedition. Distinction is why others actually read –and remember—the text in a Patagonia catalogue: observe how an essay printed years ago keeps the brand lingering in more than just Mr Murphy's closet.

He recalls how the author described one's 'inner dirtbag'—a phrase with which Mr Murphy could instantly relate. "My inner dirtbag is the part of me that gets up at 5am to fit in a whitewater paddle before work," he says, "I cut out that essay and kept it for quite some time—it was a concept that stuck with me."

As these economic times rattle the performance apparel retail sector, the most successful brands will be those that find other such ways to stick with the customer. 

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