ASK THE EXPERT: PERFORMANCE & COMFORT

Performance apparel manufacturers and brands know that consumers are likely to come back for more if their clothes offer comfort as well as functionality, but how best to engineer comfort in is an ongoing discussion.

Comfort zone



The Circuit cycling jersey from Icebreaker's spring-summer 2012 collection.

Icebreaker

Merino wool outdoor apparel specialist Icebreaker appointed Keryn Francisco as its new global product design director in October 2010. She had spent the previous six years in senior design positions at Nike, first as US design director of women's sportswear and then as global design director for the women's training category. On taking up the Icebreaker position she said she thought merino wool could change how people "feel and live in performance apparel" and that "the natural choice is the choice of the future". Fibre that comes from a lamb rather than a lab has to offer important advantages, she believes.

Question: Why does greater comfort mean better performance?

Answer: Greater comfort means zero distraction. The less chafing, restriction and over-heating consumers experience, the more their bodies will move freely and efficiently.

Q: Why were many outdoor and sports garments uncomfortable in the past? Why have the manufacturers of synthetic fibres found it difficult to emulate the comfort offered by natural fibres such as merino wool?

A: I think there was a period of over-teching out a garment because so many synthetic 'advances' were being made. It was like a garment wasn't deemed technical unless it had a lot of branded bells and whistles (dri-this, fit-that, senseless curvy seaming) and ten different hangtags to describe all the chemical processes that were applied to the fabric. Outdoor clothing was also traditionally very bulky because it appeared rugged and durable. We believe that nature is the ultimate laboratory and true innovation is simple, functional and real. A good layering system alleviates unnecessary bulk. Sure, we can enhance a fabric with modern technology, but we would never compromise merino's original design and effectiveness. It's tested over time, in different environments and different conditions: born in the mountains, and worn in the mountains and no synthetic fibres can say the same.

Q: Given the extent to which subjectivity can come into play here, what do you believe is the best way to measure the comfort a particular fabric or garment can offer to wearers?

A: The best way to measure the effectiveness of a fabric is how much time you spend fussing over it or replacing it. If you're buying a special kind of detergent to get the stink out of your clothes every single time you wear them, or you need to replace the garment because it isn't versatile enough, then you have to try something timeless in design and built to last, something naturally antimicrobial that you will wash less and wear more on your trail activity and in an urban environment with one garment.



Icebreaker

Expert: Keryn Francisco
Company: Icebreaker
Website: www.icebreaker.com
Position: Global product design director

Q: Which of these is the most important contributor to a comfortable garment, and why: feeling against the skin, moisture management, fit, support in the right places, thermal regulation?

A: All of these factors are important to a comfortable garment because we design holistically. However, in regards specifically to merino, the feeling against the skin (or what we call 'Love at First Touch') is especially important. It's not your grandmother's itchy sweater. It's soft, silky and has an incredible lustre that you don't find in other fabrics. Fit follows closely because these are the primary experiences in the dressing room.

Q: What is your reaction to the findings of a recent NPD survey of consumers in the US, that women and men put comfort as only the sixth most important quality they look for in apparel?

A: They obviously haven't experienced merino.

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