An experienced commentator on the performance textiles sector and applications in sports and outdoor apparel has spoken about a series of issues that he believes will prove important for companies in the industry in the year ahead.

Predictions for 2012 and beyond



The founder of Concept III, the New Jersey-based company that develops, sources and produces fabric-based finished products for the outdoor market, has made some predictions for 2012.

One starting point for Concept III's president, David Parkes, is that the outdoor sector is successful and he believes it will continue to enjoy success. Economic conditions are tricky in most parts of the world, but the commitment to innovation that companies right across the outdoor supply chain have consistently shown has made a big difference and will continue to do so, in his view.

"We should remember that this industry has always been focused on innovation," Mr Parkes says, "and on the differential that the textile can give. Also, we have standards that make us different to the rest of the apparel industry. This is why we have been successful and still are today."

For the immediate future, he believes design will become more and more important in outdoor apparel. There is a large amount of similarity among outdoor products, he says, but designers can make them different. David Parkes, who comes originally from the United Kingdom, says: "European designers have the opportunity to make fascinating garments, with wonderful trim treatments and so on. The price-point is different there from in the US, there is no focusing in Europe on price and cost all the time and we need to try to bring that here. We need to look at what's happening inside garments. Is it just about functionality? This is changing. The linings of garments are going to become very interesting, with the growth of prints inside. Textures and surfaces are important on the inside too."

Another prediction centres on natural fibres. He feels merino wool, particularly in blends, is becoming very important and attributes this to the impact that Lenzing has made by blending its cellulosic fibres with naturals.

And then there is shapewear, popular for aesthetic reasons in leggings, hosiery, swimwear and so on, but making an important contribution to performance and comfort in outdoor apparel too and on the point of becoming "a much bigger story", according to the Concept III founder.

The apparel market has reacted positively to developments in shapewear for, mostly, aesthetic reasons. David Parkes believes shapewear is also poised to improve performance and comfort in outdoor apparel too.

Invista

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David Parkes, founder of Concept III, has firm ideas about what 2012 holds for the outdoor industry.

Concept III

Old hat

But not all of the hot topics will be new. Lighter weight fabrics for lighter weight products will continue to present challenges to product developers in 2012. We seem to have been talking about lighter fabric weights for many years, and sustainability for even longer. "I can only talk about the trends I see emerging," David Parkes continues. "We talked about sustainability 15 or even 20 years ago, so it's not new, but what is emerging is that sustainability is now really taking a grip. It's a very important part of the supply chain; the focus on saving energy and water, for example, is going to be a big part of textile development."

Previous talk on sustainability has focused much more on recycling, he says, but consumers have shown themselves reluctant to pay more for clothes made from recycled material, except perhaps in the case of a prominent brand, such as Patagonia, The North Face or Nike, which can charge premium prices anyway. For Mr Parkes, "the story is much bigger" when the focus switches to reducing the use of chemicals in the textile supply chain, and the use of water and energy.

Numbers game

"And the timing for presenting this story is better now because we have much stronger information," he continues, "thanks to companies such as Kingwhale, who this year launched new Low Impact Dyeing Technology, which uses 15% fewer dyestuffs, 22% less electricity for heating and cooling, 60% less water for dye presentation and wastewater treatment and 50% less thermal energy to create steam. We have the information, it's meaningful and consumers can relate to it."

In terms of the prices apparel companies will have to pay for those textiles in 2012, his prediction is for a stabilisation, with the industry able to put the dramatic rises of the past 12 months behind it, for the most part.

On sourcing, he says that one of the most interesting, fascinating and exciting dynamics is that "things are happening here", in the US. There are yarn and fibre developers and manufacturers and huge energy around finished product brands, but Mr Parkes is confident that, over the next five years, these companies will be joined, once again, by manufacturers producing textiles in the US. "One major operator in Asia has already declared it will need to have a textile operation in the US within that timeframe," he explains. "We're not talking about garment production; that will happen in Central America. Central America is viable now; brands can move production down there and get product back quickly. But textile production will return; there are a lot of dynamics creating a situation that makes it possible to consider domestic production."

Cheap as China

His confidence stems from a combination of financial, political and sourcing concerns coming out of the textile industry in Asia at the moment. "But it's going to be a slow drift," he adds. The valuation of the dollar during much of 2011 has helped, because there are some categories of textiles that David Parkes insists could be produced as cheaply in the US as in China right now, and that over the next few years, the number of categories to which this applies will increase.



A Denali outdoor jacket from The North Face. The brand began using recycled fleece material from Polartec for the jacket in spring 2009, but not everyone has been able to make an impression with recycled stories. Energy, water and chemical use will be important sustainability talking points in 2012.

The North Face/SBX

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