Fibre manufacturer Invista launched a new concept, Lycra Sport, at the Outdoor Retailer Summer Market in Salt Lake City in July. It expects consumers' expectations of stretch garments to change as a result.

Stretch fabrics: the game changes



Several years of research and development, involving a network of textile laboratories, have gone into the development of Lycra Sport. It should come as no surprise, then, that the company behind it, US-based fibre manufacturer Invista, refers to Lycra Sport as an actual programme, rather than as a mere product.

In order to qualify to be part of the programme, and to earn one of the new hang-tags that go with it, a fabric must pass the minimum standards related to Lycra fibre content, fabric weight, recovery power, bi-directional elongation, fabric set and fabric shrinkage. As a result, a Lycra Sport hang-tag on a garment will help to reassure customers that the fabric is not only effective in terms of stretch, but that it is able to meet other important performance parameters. For example, the fabric programme is available for sport socks, but to meet the high Invista standards, a sock must offer the correct levels of foot-hugging power and lasting fit.

"Lycra Sport fabric is off to a very good start," says Julien Born, global director, activewear and outdoor apparel for Invista. "Our mill customers have already expressed great interest in the programme, and many fabric styles are in the process of being qualified."

He says his company has recognised that the message to consumers with regard to stretch had become confusing, with the word stretch or even the spandex name appearing on many sport fabric hang-tags as "a proxy for fit, comfort or freedom of movement". He says the

Research among 2,000 active consumers in five countries revealed that people's top priorities, with regard to the qualities sports clothing must have, are comfort and shape retention.

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research that has gone into the new programme confirms that these benefits are of utmost importance to consumers when purchasing a sports garment, but that the stretch garment manufacturers can achieve this by including a small percentage of spandex in the fabric mix is only a small part of the equation.

Timely launch

According to Mr Born, Invista is making "a small statement" in launching Lycra Sport now. "Sport is all about movement, all about the body, the skin and the articles we wear moving. Lycra allows fabric to move freely and recover." He describes the launch as timely because it will help companies in the sports and outdoor arena add some quality without having to take big risks.

The build-up to the launch has involved in-depth analysis of more than 50 garments from leading sports and outdoor apparel brands. From this, Invista concluded that optimum stretch performance included, for a garment weighing 200 grammes, a loss of fit of between 0 and 4% with elongation of up to 40%. For a garment weighing more, 600 grammes, the best examples, could offer a similar low level of loss of fit with elongation of up to 65%. Invista has decided that only fabrics that allow this level of performance will qualify for inclusion in the Lycra Sport programme.

Confidence levels in Invista that this will make a difference to shoppers are high. Julien Born accepts that consumers already encounter a proliferation of hang-tags every time they go shopping for sports gear, and says that when people have too much choice, it can sometimes appear that they don't have any choice any more because the hang-tags just hang there, and no one pays any attention to what they say. However, part of the research that has gone into this involved extensive consumer surveys involving 2,000 people in the US, Brazil, the UK, Germany and China, and it revealed that people with an active lifestyle and who take part in sport at least once a week make comfort and shape retention priorities one and two in terms of the qualities they want their clothing to have.

What really matters

Mr Born makes the claim that most garments with hang-tags promising consumers stretch at the moment will do only that—stretch. "Shape retention and the return of the fabric's characteristics are what really matter," he says, "and Lycra Sport will help garments meet consumers' expectations. With this development, we're changing the game with stretch."

A wide range of garments, from stretch T-shirt tops to compression shirts, will end up with the new hang-tags because of the variety of the target markets of the fabric mills to which Invista began rolling out the Lycra Sport programme in June. By the time of the launch at Outdoor Retailer, the company had received more than 200 fabric types to assess. At the high end, these contained between 20% and 25% Lycra, but on average had between 8% and 10%. They include warp knit and circular knit fabrics, but, Mr Born points out, are all fabrics that have been engineered for sports applications. No fabric mill or finished garment manufacturer is under any obligation to take part. If they want to stick to traditional Lycra hang-tags for their garments, they can. "But as we've mentioned, this is already going into socks," the Invista director says, "and bras and other underwear products will follow quickly. It will then evolve into lots of other categories, including swimwear."



Invista launched the Lycra Sport programme at Outdoor Retailer Summer Market 2009.
Invista

Sex appeal

The products that carry Lycra Sport branding will appeal both to men and women. Julien Born says that as the original Lycra brand developed, it quickly became particularly popular in intimate apparel and other clothing for women. Lycra Sport is, at least in part, a recognition of that imbalance and an attempt to move stretch into an arena that includes men too.

Sample fabrics that qualify are already available from Invista mill partners in different parts of the world.

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