Outdoor goods manufacturers should be cheered by the fact that more people are deciding to get out in the open, whether for economic, health or social reasons.

Encouraging signs for the outdoor sector

While the impact of the global economic downturn is not to be underestimated, it seems it may have presented a silver lining for the outdoor sector. Figures show that many people are turning down exotic overseas holidays in favour of outdoor holidays in their own countries. As a result, outdoor apparel, footwear and accessories manufacturers could actually benefit from the shortage of disposable income being felt by many in the current climate.

Recent surveys have revealed particularly positive signs for areas of Europe. Research undertaken by the Outdoor Industries Association (OIA), for example, showed the United Kingdom outdoor sector is revealing positive signs. It found that 54% of core consumers in the UK are not intending to reduce their spending on outdoor products and only 13% will cut back (33% were undecided).

Furthermore, of the 3,500 outdoor consumers it questioned across the UK, 80% said they believe outdoor products offer good value for money. And, while 64% said they would now look more closely at price when choosing outdoor products, 77% of consumers said product performance was more important for them than price.

Louise Ramsay, OIA director, says this is definitely good news for the industry. "As the economic downturn continues, it is heartening to hear that our consumers intend to maintain their investment in outdoor products," she says. However, she believes getting the right balance between promoting product performance and value for money will be "crucial".

Unsurprisingly, the internet is playing an important role in the decision-making process for outdoor clothing and accessories. While 70% of respondents said they had bought goods through specialist outdoor stores, 27% said they had used specialist online outdoor retailers to buy what they needed. A large majority of people (70%) research potential outdoor product purchases on brand websites and 62% said they carry out this research to compare prices. Although 54% of outdoor consumers still purchase most of their outdoor goods in store, just 28% now buy the outdoor products they need exclusively in store.



Activities such as backpacking and camping are becoming increasingly popular, particularly in the US.

C.A.M.P.

"From earlier research, we know that more people are staying in the UK this year and going on outdoor breaks, and campsites and outdoor activity providers are enjoying record bookings," Ms Ramsay says. "Despite the prevailing economic conditions, this does offer opportunities for outdoor businesses."

Getting away from it all

Meanwhile, German think-tank the Zukunftsinstitut has been coming up with similar findings. On the back of research it recently carried out, the group believes the outdoor market is booming and that its best days are probably yet to come.

According to the Kelheim-based organisation, one of the main factors in the outdoor industry's favour is that changes in social and cultural values mean people are beginning to value "immaterial experiences over the accumulation

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German think-tank the Zukunftsinstitut believes people are beginning to value uplifting outdoor experiences more than the accumulation of wealth.

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of material wealth". That means the uplifting experiences people can have by enjoying the outdoors, far away from mass consumerism, offer an escape from the pressures of high-speed lifestyles and provide us with "fresh input and new opportunities to redefine ourselves".

The study also pointed out that, whether people are choosing a new breakfast cereal, taking up a new sport or buying a car, few choices are made these days without considering their potential health effects. Nature and the outdoors have acquired strong connotations of health and well-being. Since the outdoor industry highlights the health benefits of exercise and sports in the outdoors, it can only profit from this development.

Even issues such as climate change can have a positive impact, according to the Zukunftsinstitut. The desire to experience nature close-up runs parallel to consumer demands for a more mindful approach to our natural environment. Outdoor advocates, as well as manufacturers who have made sustainability the cornerstone of their corporate philosophies, are in demand, it claims.

The Zukunftsinstitut's analysis of emerging market trends came up with five key ideas that it believes will shape the future of the outdoor industry. First, it predicts that the outdoor market will become integral to consumer lifestyles and will be seen as a source of pleasure. Second, it believes the industry will merge with other crossover industries, including the personal health, food, tourism, services, fashion and, in particular, technology industries.

The institute also foresees that markets with flat hierarchies, such as the outdoor segment, must help form a new consumer market marked by ethical consumerism. It suggests that consumer demand for the outdoor lifestyle is no longer subject to any dogma and will create a mass market within the next five years. Finally, it indicates that the outdoor industry must find consumers where they are if they want to win over new customers, which means fitting around their busy lives. Again, an emphasis on online access and availability is pertinent here.

One of the most important points the report makes is that manufacturers and brands in the outdoor sector need to be especially open to product innovation if they are to reach their full potential.

Camping out

Over the Atlantic, there is less optimism across the outdoor sector. However, studies suggest Americans are also getting outdoors more, and appear to have been particularly drawn to camping since the economic downturn began. According to The Outdoor Foundation and outdoor product provider The Coleman Company, there was a 7.4% increase in car and backyard camping in 2008. Furthermore, the research showed that the vast majority of people (84%) who go camping also take part in multiple outdoor activities. Hiking and swimming were particularly popular.

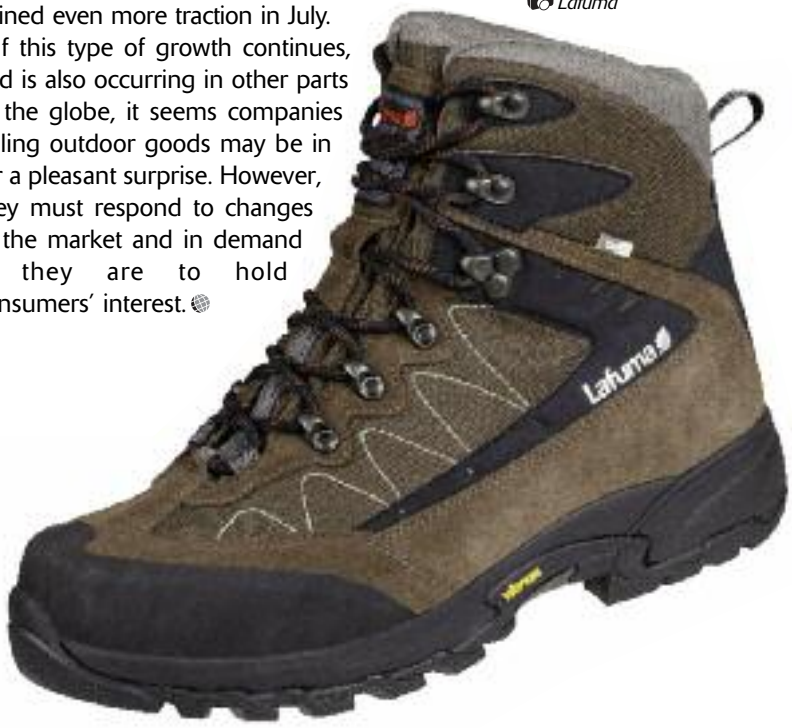
"In today's economy, people are returning to simpler lifestyles, the 'less is more' ethic," says Christine Fanning, executive director at The Outdoor Foundation. "Reservations for campsites and sales for camping gear are up," she continues. She believes this is because "camping provides fun, affordable opportunities for families to enjoy time together".

The study showed that 33.7 million Americans aged six and above camped in 2008, and that collectively they made more than 597 million outings, averaging 14 camping days per participant. The research revealed that 56% of all campers are male and 43% female, while the 25-to-44 age group accounts for more than a third of the total number of campers (34.5%). The over-45 age group is a close second at 29%.

Meanwhile, an Outdoor Industry Association report for the US showed that outdoor sales fell 4% in July to $358 million from $371 million in the same month last year. However, the Outdoor Topline Report showed that interest in outdoor recreation and camping continued and many camping, backpacking and hiking products saw healthy sales in July.

In dollars, backpacking tents jumped 14%, mid-temperature (11-25°C) synthetic mummy sleeping bags grew 3% and hiking boots gained 13%. Cool temperatures across the nation pushed insulated top sales up 17% in both units and dollars. Shell tops, with $5 million in sales, gained 3% in units and 6% in dollars. Up 27% in units and 31% in dollars, multi-sport shoes gained even more traction in July.

If this type of growth continues, and is also occurring in other parts of the globe, it seems companies selling outdoor goods may be in for a pleasant surprise. However, they must respond to changes in the market and in demand if they are to hold consumers' interest.



Hiking boot sales in the US rose 13% in July according to data from the Outdoor Topline Report.

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