BRAND PROFILE: ORTOVOX

The German outdoor brand relies on wool to keep consumers warm and dry, and has played a key role in the development of emergency equipment for the mountains.

Ortovox puts safety at top of agenda

With the number of avalanche deaths in Europe hitting its highest level in five years during the last ski season, keeping safe on the mountains is climbing the agenda at all resorts. By February, there had been 75 casualties, including two young members of the US national ski team, but at least 20 others were rescued.

Among them was an experienced ski tourer on Riedberger Horn, southern Germany, where there had not been an avalanche in 20 years. When disaster struck, he was buried two metres deep but was saved by the Oberallgäu Mountain School using Ortovox transceivers. The German brand says developments in technology are key to locating people quickly and increasing their chances of survival.

Its founders, Gerald Kampel and Jürgen Wegner, launched a device in 1980 that revolutionised avalanche safety. Mr Kampel's background in the engineering industry meant he had already invented a number of measurement tools, improving safety in railway construction, and Ortovox's F2 transceiver that operated on multiple bandwidths rather than one meant rescuers were able to locate victims more accurately. Within two years, it had become a bestseller, and the small company based south of Munich



Mountain teams practise using Ortovox transceivers or beacons.

Ortovox/Hansi Heckmair

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had the capital to expand its offices to the US, Austria, Switzerland and France. Rucksacks and shovels were added to the offering, and by 1988 it branched into apparel and began to focus on wool.

Back to nature

All Ortovox products contain wool, which it says gives "natural advantages" over synthetics. The merino for its baselayers and t-shirts comes from four farms in western Tasmania, where sheep herds average 10,000 animals. Grazing on pasture grass, which is high in protein, in a moderate climate, leads to uniform fibre growth and offers advantages in terms of fibre diameter and durability.

"The functionality of wool simply is unique," says managing director Christian Schneidermeier. "Wool not only warms when wet it also neutralises odour and it is temperature regulating. Another reason why we work with wool is that it a natural fibre, a sustainable raw material. Our sheep are shorn once to twice a year – so they grow a new coat all by themselves."

Merino Cool is blended with Lenzing's Tencel fibre made from eucalyptus wood from South Africa to make baselayers and tops, while Merino Shield, a blend of merino wool with Cordura, is used to make scuff-resistant shorts, pants and backpacks.

For insulation, Ortovox uses 'Swisswool' from the harsh mountainous landscape of the Swiss Alps. The second-shearing wool cannot be woven directly, and was formerly unable to attain competitive prices in global markets. When federal subsidies for the raising of sheep were reduced, many Swiss sheep farmers were nearly driven out of business. Now more than 22 collection stations have been set up, where the sheep farmers deliver 400 metric tons from their animals twice a year.

The highest grade white wool is able to absorb up to 35% of its own weight in moisture without feeling wet, while the lower quality material is primarily used as insulating material for building construction.

Ortovox mixes the high grades with 12% corn-based fibre Ingeo at a facility in Belgium, and the finished lengths of fleece, which are produced in various thicknesses, are then sent to locations in Europe to manufacture the insulation products.

"Our wool experts have developed a wear comfort system from the first to the third layer that offers the highest functionality, protection and comfort on the mountain through an intelligent combination of the natural material with other innovative fibres," adds Mr Schneidermeier. "This focus on innovations was the breakthrough for us. Now it is us who make the trends."



Insulation-grade Swisswool is sourced from 22 collection stations.

Ortovox

Safety first

The company is growing rapidly. Since 2012 it has doubled the number of employees and sales from the 2014/2015 season were 34% higher than the previous year.

While apparel and accessories are its major revenue drivers, avalanche safety sector remains at the heart of the business. Its transceivers have progressed from the F1 in 1994 which was the most sold transceiver worldwide, according to the company, to the M1 in 1998, the first fully compatible, digital-analogue avalanche transceiver and to the 3+ in 2009, which uses smart antenna technology.

In 2013 it incorporated search-and-rescue technology into a backpack, using a summer version of the Recco SAR1 avalanche system. The collection combines back sections made of



Ortovox Free Rider 24 avalanche backpack with ABS and Modular Airbag Safety-System.

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Ortovox's snow gear includes shovels, probes, bivi bags and first aid kits.

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moisture-regulating Swisswool for control and is equipped with ABS technology and a removable airbag system.

Earlier this year it signed a multi-year partnership with the ski resort at the Stubai Glacier in Austria, setting up a training centre at the resort's Gamsgarten cable car station and three checkpoints. An Intersports shop at Eisgrat on the glacier has become an official Ortovox test centre. Interested parties can practise searching for avalanche victims with avalanche transceivers and probes and can hire the equipment. The checkpoints monitor the function of avalanche transceivers and help raise awareness of the danger of avalanches.

Ortovox has also published a series of information guides to help people stay safe while climbing or skiing. They are part of a wider collection that it calls its Safety Academy Lab, a series of interactive tutorials that convey information about avalanches, how they start and how to react to them. Earlier this year it won a gold ISPO award for its Safety Academy Mountain 3D, a training tool for avalanche theory that includes training on how risk factors such as slope angle and weather conditions affect the formation of avalanches, and how to plan a ski tour according to these conditions.

However, it has not all been plain sailing. In March it was forced to issue a precautionary product recall for the S1+ avalanche transceiver, which was launched in 2011. It said in very rare cases, "a disturbance can occur in the transmission function" due to the possible failure of a component. "The safety of our customers has been our highest priority for 35 years," it said in a statement. "Despite our comprehensive quality control measures, we have now discovered a scenario that has never occurred before. Our examinations have shown that in rare cases, a component can fail after an indeterminate period of use."

Sustainability

In July, Ortovox cemented its good practice by signing up to the Fair Wear Foundation – a standard which aims to promote good working conditions – and the Partnership for Sustainable Textiles.

"Transparency and traceability are important issues," explains Mr Schneidermeier. "Of course, this includes good working conditions for our suppliers. Since fair working conditions have been important to us for a very long time and we have maintained trusting partnerships with our suppliers for many years, we were able to implement the FWF guidelines quickly."

On joining the Partnership for Sustainable Textiles, which works to improve the social, environmental and economic conditions in the textile supply chain, he added: "The partnership offers an ideal platform for exchanging ideas with other companies and organisations, for learning from each other and for working together to change something.

"Because we just started the whole process, issues like sustainability and transparency will play an important role for us next year."



Ortovox's Safety Academy Mountain 3D uses 3D models to teach the basics of tour planning, risk management and avalanche assessment.

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