BRAND PROFILE: ISBJÖRN

Environmentally conscious Swedish brand Isbjörn aims to give children the clothing they need to embrace the great outdoors.

The adventurers of tomorrow

The polar bear is considered one of the toughest animals on the planet. Not only does it survive in some of the most treacherous conditions known to man in the Arctic circle, its very existence is increasingly threatened by climate change. Swedish entrepreneurs Maria Frykman Forsberg and Camilla Schmidt chose the name Isbjörn (the Swedish word for polar bear) when they launched their brand as they wanted the products they created to be just as tough.

It was founded in 2005 after the women, both recently first-time mothers, discovered that there was a lack of suitable outdoor clothing for their children. Rather than continue their search, they decided to start developing the products themselves. Their aim was to create the best possible children's apparel, while always keeping a respect for the environment at the heart of their business.

Isbjörn got its big break early on, securing a deal to sell its products at a leading Swedish outdoor retailer. It now distributes to 10 countries in Europe and Asia, with Norway, Germany, the UK, Switzerland, Japan and China among its most important overseas markets. It began selling in retail stores in Norway in 2008 and the country is now the brand's third biggest market with 15% of total turnover. It had high hopes for further growth in the country in the coming years. The ISPO award it received in 2013 for its children's skiwear was an important accolade as it allowed the brand to make a name for itself in a wider market. Its manufacturing takes place in China; Ms Forsberg, who serves as company CEO, tells *WSA* that Isbjörn has a "long-term co-operation with a good company" in the country. She visits the facilities there three or four times per year to check that the quality of the products and the working conditions meet its requirements.

Functionality first

Children are "multisporters by nature", the brand states, but their love for the outdoors could be damaged if they don't have access to the right clothing and equipment. It wants to encourage kids to be active by providing them with apparel that is comfortable, breathable and warm. Isbjörn's range covers ages 0 to 14 and includes all the different layers a child needs, as well as a range of accessories including socks, hats and gloves. Its garments are tested by children, including those of Ms Forsberg and Ms Schmidt. The founders believe that if children are exposed to high performance products at a young age, they will continue to appreciate them as they move into adult clothing. It maintains that garments for children need to be even more functional because those wearing them are more active and more susceptible to changes in temperature.

"We differentiate ourselves by using only premium technical materials, which also take an environmentally friendly approach wherever possible," Ms Forsberg explains. Among their partners are performance insulation and fabric developer PrimaLoft and textile chemicals specialist Rudolf Group. Isbjörn began working with PrimaLoft in 2016, when it used PrimaLoft Black Insulation Eco, which is made from 60% recycled content, in its Frost lightweight jacket. In early 2017, it announced the release of the Panda PrimaLoft Stretch Hoodie, which incorporates PrimaLoft's Silver Insulation Performance Fleece. It features a proprietary water-repellent treatment that is said to accelerate the rate at which the fleece dries by 44%. It also retains 99% of warmth, even during extremely wet conditions. "Insulation for staying warm and dry is vital in our range," Ms Forsberg tells *WSA*. She says the brand chose Silver Insulation Performance Fleece as it outperforms "typical fleece" in both wet and dry conditions.

As part of its autumn-winter 2017-18 collection, Isbjörn released the Expedition hard-shell jacket and trousers, which it claims are the first outdoor garments for children that have three-layer construction. They consist of a



Jochen Perschmann

COPYRIGHT WTP ©

comfortable inner lining, an outer material and a high-performance membrane made from bluesign-approved fabric. The brand became a bluesign partner in January 2013 and its autumn-winter 2017-18 collection, which was unveiled at the 2017 ISPO exhibition in Munich in February, is more than 90% bluesign-approved. This range "builds on already strong green credentials", according to Ms Forsberg, who believes her team has "raised its design game" to develop it. The outer material is treated with Rudolf's fluorocarbon-free water-repellent Bionic Eco Finish. "It was our first choice for both performance and the environment," she reveals. The construction of the Expedition collection is designed to limit the movement between the three layers, reducing wear and tear and prolonging the garment's lifecycle.

Environmental awareness

"We are all aware that the production of clothes affects the climate and environment," Ms Forsberg pronounces when discussing Isbjörn's approach to environmental responsibility. The brand abides by the 'Four Rs' – reduce, reuse, repair and recycle – when developing its products. It encourages customers to make informed choices so that they only purchase the products that are right for them. It offers a range of layers, from base layers to shells, and its clothing is adaptable and suitable for use in a variety of weather conditions. This means customers won't feel the need to purchase as many items. It keeps superfluous decoration to a minimum, preferring to stick to practical and functional designs in order to save resources.

It urges customers to pass clothing on to younger cousins, siblings or family friends once their children have grown out of them. The best way to ensure this happens is to make apparel that lasts. "Every Isbjörn garment has been carefully designed for long-term use, using the toughest performing materials to ensure it can be used again and again," Ms Forsberg insists. Among the features common to its products are grow cuffs, which allow the sleeves of a jacket or the legs of a pair of pants to be extended as the child grows. This eliminates the need to purchase a new garment every year. The brand also offers a limited repair service to discourage customers from discarding garments for a minor fault that could be easily fixed. "We are happy to do this to ensure the longer life of the garment," Ms Forsberg explains. Recycling of products is a "last resort", she adds; the brand would prefer that they are reused. As well as using recycled materials, some content can be recycled when a product reaches the end of its lifecycle. It hopes to introduce some recyclable garments into future collections.



The founders of Isbjörn, Maria Frykman Forsberg and Camilla Schmidt (l-r), are actively involved in all aspects of the business.

Isbjörn

Bright future

"We foresee a very exciting time for the company over the next few years," Ms Forsberg reveals. She says there is an increasing interest and appreciation from the market and from consumers for what Isbjörn can offer in terms of sustainable products. Children's apparel is the brand's core market, giving it an edge over rivals, for whom it is often a secondary segment of their business. The brand is "passionate" about getting more children to enjoy the freedom of the outdoors, the CEO enthuses. The brand believes that with the right apparel, the active youngsters of today will grow into the "adventurers of tomorrow".



The Panda PrimaLoft Stretch Hoodie uses Primaloft's Silver Insulation Performance Fleece.

Isbjörn

COPYRIGHT