

BRAND PROFILE: ODLO

Baselayer and underwear specialist Odlo is aiming to become a brand that customers turn to all year round. Its latest innovation, Ceramicool, is a ceramic-based active cooling technology developed with summer in mind.

One step ahead

Sports and outdoor apparel manufacturer Odlo may have its headquarters in Hünenberg, Switzerland, but its roots are very much in Norway. The company was founded in 1946 in Oslo by Odd Roar Lofterød, who remained the figurehead for the next 33 years. Known as a creative, unconventional thinker, his mantra of “always make sure you’re one step ahead” was what inspired and continues to inspire Odlo’s innovation-led approach to product development.

Born in 1915 in Norway, Mr Lofterød’s upbringing took place against a backdrop of war and unemployment. Tired of waiting for a job to come to him, he placed an advert that said: “Worker available for 100 Krone” (around £6 at current exchange rates). This display of initiative led to him securing a job in a factory that made machinery for the clothing industry. It was here that he learned his trade and gained important technical expertise about knitting machinery. In 1946, he set up his own company, Odlo Fabrikker, purchasing his first knitting and sewing machines from his former employer. He immediately trademarked the brand name, showing the sort of foresight that has been key to Odlo’s rise to the top of the winter sports clothing industry.

The biggest obstacle to the company’s instant success was a shortage of raw materials. After an initial attempt at manufacturing intimate apparel for women, Mr Lofterød came up with a better idea. It was inspired by his son, Odd Roar Junior, who was a member of Norway’s junior speed skating team. Concerned for the wellbeing of his offspring during the harsh Norwegian winter, Odd Roar Senior set about creating a new training suit made from a nylon stretch fibre, Helanca, which was developed by Swiss textile company Heberlein. The suit made an immediate impression on the teammates of the young man and word of it quickly spread. Soon, some of Norway’s top winter sports athletes were at Odlo’s door desperate to try it out for themselves.

It used the same fibre to develop a warm, stretchy, high-performance suit for cross-country skiers and speed skaters. The suit was worn by the Norwegian Olympic team at the 1964 Winter Olympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria. By the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo, Japan, there were 22 national teams competing in Odlo kit.

Speed skaters also inspired a collection it created in 1973, Odlo Termic. The company says it was the first fully synthetic range of functional sports underwear. It was designed to address the problem that athletes had with cotton underwear, which was impractical to wear underneath their skating suits. As a result, they often wore simple briefs, even during the freezing cold. Odlo Termic offered them a much more pleasant option.

Odd Roar Junior took over the running of his father’s business in 1979 and moved its headquarters to Switzerland in 1986. The following year, he invented the Athletic Clothing System (ACS), which has served as the blueprint for Odlo’s product development ever since. It broke down outdoor clothing into three layers: the first, the underwear, is responsible for moisture management; the middle layer takes care of

Odlo’s Ceramicool technology features ceramic particles integrated within the fibre that help to keep the wearer cool.







Odlo's heritage is in winter sports clothing. It has had great success supplying Winter Olympic athletes since the 1960s.

 Odlo

temperature regulation; and the outer layer serves to protect the wearer from the wind and rain. The company says it designs its clothing "from the skin up", with kits built from the inside out.

The mother of invention

Odlo's penchant for innovation carried through the turn of the century. It achieved what it describes as "a major breakthrough" in 2002 with the development of its Effect by Odlo fabric, which incorporates silver-treated fibres that protect against odour-causing bacteria. It released its first underwear collection to feature this fabric the same year, and within two years all its underwear products were made from it.

In 2006, it launched another fabric for sports underwear called Cubic. The 3D construction of this ultra-lightweight, knitted fabric helps optimise temperature regulation.

Odlo then built on the success of its close-fitting Evolution Light underwear, which was first released in 2003. These products have minimal stitching and flat seams; Odlo says this makes them "fit like a second skin". The updated range, unveiled in 2008, made use of circular knitting technology to create a stretchy garment that won't cling to the wearer's skin when they exercise.

The Evolution underwear range is one of several to employ the company's Temperature Control System (TCS), which was created to help customers choose the right product for them depending on the outside temperature and the level of activity. The system has different categories of warmth, ranging from X-Light to X-Warm. The 'light' categories are for summer and prioritise moisture management, while the 'warm' categories feature extra insulation for better heat retention during winter.

Odlo began using recycled polyester in the Evolution range in winter 2012. This was part of its ongoing commitment to becoming a more sustainable and environmentally friendly business. It called this Evolution Greentec and says that it was the first seamless underwear to be made from 100% recyclable material. Garments from the 2017 Evolution Blackcomb range, which uses the same recycled material, can be returned to Odlo stores when they reach the end of their life. It will then "feed them back into the recycling process".

In its Winter 2013/14 collection, it unveiled a range of underwear, Muscle Force, specifically designed for downhill skiers. The products use what the company calls its "zoned muscle support" to reduce muscle vibration. This saves energy so the wearer is able to ski for longer. This technology has also been incorporated into a range of baselayer pants, which have targeted compression areas that boost the blood flow to the legs. This is said to delay muscle tiredness as it increases the oxygen supply to the muscles and accelerates the breakdown of lactic acid, the build-up of which causes muscle soreness. Odlo maintains that the Muscle Force technology in the baselayer pants reduces muscle fatigue by 42%.

Broader horizons

Odlo has made no secret of its desire to escape the perception that it is a purely winter-focused brand. It released its first running and outdoor collection in 1994 and the summer 2011 launch of clothing for mountain and road bikers meant the company was able to offer year-round performance clothing.

Its most recent innovation, Ceramicool, is also targeted at the summer sports market. The



Cycling apparel is one of the areas Odlo is strengthening as it seeks to move away from an overreliance on winter sales.



brand says the active cooling technology, which was introduced in April this year, is designed to help athletes in their “never-ending quest” for that extra degree of performance. The key to the technology is the ceramic particles that are integrated within the yarns of the Ceramicool fabric. Their good thermal conductive properties help to quickly move heat away from the skin, while the flat cross-section of the yarn creates channels to allow warm air to be released. These two mechanisms combine to keep the wearer cool. Odlo claims materials featuring the Ceramicool technology have been proven to cool the body by up to 1°C.

The Ceramicool line is available in three different styles. The standard Ceramicool garments have panels made from the ceramic-laced fabric on inner sensitive areas like the underarms, neck and back. Ceramicool Pro combines the Ceramicool fabric with areas of mesh panelling positioned in areas where breathability is most important. Ceramicool seamless products are made from 100% Ceramicool yarn and have no seams for increased comfort. In 2018, Odlo will further develop this innovation by launching Ceramiwool, a baselayer that combines the benefits of natural fibres like merino wool with those of Ceramicool.

Chief executive, Christophe Bézu, who took over in 2015 as part of a management restructuring, says Ceramicool is the first major innovation the company has launched in a summer range. This is part of its strategy to

become an all year round brand. “We still depend too heavily on winter and mountain sports,” he tells WSA.

He explains the focus will be on strengthening its running, cycling and training categories. For summer 2017, it expanded its cycling collection containing garments for mountain bikers, road cyclists and trail riders. In the medium-term, the brand wants 40%-45% of turnover to come from its spring and summer ranges, Mr Bézu reveals. It also intends to remain “one step ahead” with its functional sports underwear, which it still considers its core product category.

Odlo hopes the introduction of products better suited to warmer conditions will allow it to make more of an impact on markets outside of central Europe. Mr Bézu says around 80% of its current turnover comes from four markets: Germany, France, Switzerland and Austria. It expects its turnover to double in the next four years and wants half of that growth to come from non-European markets. In the short term, it is targeting the US, Canada, Japan, China, South Korea and Russia as additional areas for development.

Mr Bézu insists the brand has been “misunderstood” since it was founded, explaining it is not an outdoor brand, but a sports brand that focuses on outdoor activities. He says it aims to introduce a “disruptive innovation” to the market at least once each year, either in the winter or the summer, as the only way for a company of Odlo’s size to compete in the crowded sportswear market is to innovate. It is an approach that has served it well so far. 



Products from the Ceramicool Pro range combine the ceramic-laced fabric with areas of breathable mesh panelling.

