GAME CHANGERS: VANESSA MASON

Down has 'ten years left'

Vanessa Mason, director of engineering and technology at PrimaLoft, says she's proud of many of the company's innovations in performance insulation, but insists the best is yet to come and that, within a decade, no one in the outdoor apparel industry will be using natural down.

What are the key components of a strategy for innovation? What can companies put in place to make sure new ideas keep flowing?

It's important to listen to our customers and fully understand their needs and expectations. Working together in partnership is essential to achieve the best outcome for both parties. Always dedicate careful thinking time, rather than rushing into things – a rational thought process can make all the difference. Hiring the best talent in the industry and having the right team with the same goals is integral to future developments. It's important to celebrate failures as well as successes as they are major learning opportunities and never forget that all ideas are relevant as you never know what might lead on from the smallest suggestion. Never be afraid of exploring new materials and equipment technology and keep up to date with the latest university research and benchmark technologies from other industries. At PrimaLoft, we have the firm backing and unconditional support of our executive management team, who trust our decisions and provide support to the team when needed. Reward systems for any innovations or ideas that are patented or make it to market are also good motivators for the team. This is an amazing achievement for any product designer! Having a close collaboration and good relationship with our key suppliers is another factor in bringing innovations to market.

In your experience, what are the main reasons why even a good idea can fail to be a commercial success?

It is that initial research and taking time to think that can make all the difference. The research stage and understanding current and future market trends is crucial, from correct pricing to fully understanding the usage needs of our brand partner consumers. Design failure can be caused by not thinking properly about end-product use and end-user convenience. The production process must be right too as if it's not executed well at factory level, it can be damaging to both reputation and future development. When it comes to promoting the new technology or product at consumer level, this has to be done in the correct tone and at the right level. Keep it simple, yet ensure the key messages are communicated correctly.



The Nano Puff jacket from Patagonia featuring PrimaLoft Gold Insulation Eco. Vanessa Mason insists that, ten years from now, the outdoor industry will have stopped using natural down.

Patagonia

Which has been your favourite innovation in your time at PrimaLoft and why? If you can't narrow it down to one, mention two or three.

My favourite innovation is PrimaLoft's benchmark legacy product PrimaLoft Gold Insulation, our most widely used insulation. Our fibre technology resulted in a groundbreaking insulation structure that's as light as air. Having the smallest fibres and air spaces in the industry ensure a superior thermal performance. I'm so proud of so many of our innovations, but my absolute favourites are still in the R&D pipeline and soon to be launched. Exciting times ahead for sure!

Our news website has more than 100 items that mention PrimaLoft but none that mention Vanessa Mason. Has it been your policy to be in the background, and if so why? (If it's completely our fault, we apologise sincerely.)

It is intentional. I'm usually busy being the nerd behind the scenes, hence all the innovations.

Patagonia said at the time of the launch of PrimaLoft Gold Insulation Eco that you and they were "reducing the environmental impact of doing business". How much of your thinking time does this question take up?

At least 75%. Where would the world be without future generations who will either be impacted positively or negatively by how we treat the environment? I have a child and aspire to leave the planet in a condition that supports clean air, clean drinking water and habitable temperatures for him, his family and future generations to come.

Like most companies, PrimaLoft has had a few ups and downs. You have now spent 20 years with PrimaLoft and its previous owner, Albany International. Why do you think it has become unusual for people to spend so long at one company and why is loyalty valued less highly than it used to be?

Companies need to create and foster cultures where employees feel like they are the company's greatest asset, it is what generates success. I've never been bored at PrimaLoft. Every day we have something very exciting going on. PrimaLoft invests first in innovation, so if you're in the R&D group it is an engineer's playground. I'm fiercely loyal to my teammates and boss – they're an extension of my family. PrimaLoft has a collegiate culture where we all support everyone's endeavours and we have a massive amount of crazy fun with each other. PrimaLoft highly values and recognises employee loyalty.



PrimaLoft's director of engineering and technology, Vanessa Mason.
PrimaLoft

Polymer science and our ability to embed new functionality into yarns and fibres keep advancing. How close are we to creating synthetic down that will satisfy even the most committed advocates of natural down?

We are very close – you won't be able to tell the difference. An emerging leading trend in the outdoor market is the use of all-synthetic, blowable loose fill insulations and, for autumn-winter 2017-2018, we launch PrimaLoft Insulation ThermoPlume, which is our first 100% synthetic blowable insulation and has a down fill power equivalent of 550 in construction. It delivers the same fluidity, aesthetics and performance as goose down. I predict that down will become an obsolete material in apparel within the next 10 years.

Why have some in the outdoor industry, including very prominent brands, clung onto the idea of using natural down? And what gives you confidence your new products will change their minds?

I think it's a generational thing. A new generation of designers is going to come into this industry in the course of the next ten years and they are going to be early adopters of new technology and change agents for it. People in outdoor at the moment are super committed to down but the new generation will change that. And because our products will look like down and feel like down, as well as performing like down, consumers will be happy to go with the change. We are focusing on look and feel, in addition to the performance capabilities, specifically with the consumer in mind.

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