

New Jersey-based fabric sourcing specialist Concept III is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, and is looking forward to offering its expertise and its integrity for many years to come.

Thirty-five years of Concept III

Outdoor and athletic brands, including the biggest in the business, know Concept III and are familiar with the work it does, and has been doing for 35 years now. The company, founded by David Parkes in 1983, works to help outdoor brands and finished product manufacturers source fabric that suits their current and future needs. In parallel, it aims to help mills market themselves and their innovations to the brands.

The company emerged just as performance apparel was carving out a niche for itself as a clothing category in its own right. Mr Parkes, with more than 20 years' of textile industry experience under his belt already at the time, had been part of the team at Malden Mills, later Polartec, that brought the first fleece fabric to the market in the early 1980s; he helped make the outdoor industry's early movers (including brands such as The North Face and Patagonia) more aware of the avenues of opportunity technical textiles could open up for them.

Concept III has played its part in helping the flow of ideas continue as the outdoor industry has grown and become an important source of innovation across the entire textile sector. Fabric and finish developers in all parts of the world, whose names are now well known, had Concept III's help in opening doors for the first time at big brands' headquarters and telling their stories to those companies. Their efforts to make their processes more environmentally responsible and secure accreditation in recognition of the progress they have made in this regard also owe something to the support of Mr Parkes's company.

More unusual

As global supply chains have become more efficient, they have tended to flatten out, making middleman players like Concept III more unusual now than they were in the pre-internet

Chris Parkes (right) says everyone at Concept III has inherited a strong commitment to the values the company has had since its launch 35 years ago.

Concept III

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business world. But Concept III continues to bring supply chain partners together and continues to identify promising emerging upstream players and pair them perfectly with downstream companies that are always on the look out for new fabrics, finishes and functionalities to present to the public.

"People sometimes ask us how we have managed to survive," explains west coast sales manager, Chris Parkes, "because in the 1990s groups like Concept III made more sense than they seem to now. The answer is that it's all about long-term relationships; it's thanks to those relationships that major brands have a lot of trust in us."

In the family

Several core Concept III characteristics seem key to building and maintaining those long-term ties. "We remain a family business," Chris Parkes says, "under the leadership of my dad, David. My sister, Helen, is in charge of everything to do with finance and my brother-in-law, Rob Birn, is in charge of sales on the east coast. We try to remain humble and we try to remember the harder times as well as the big wins. And from an ethics standpoint, we know it's important to treat people the right way. Those are David's values and we all try to maintain them. We have had to adapt many times in the course of 35 years, but this is a model that works."

Same values

It may be true that, for many companies, having a knowledgeable third party as part of the mix is no longer a necessity, but Chris Parkes makes the point that have kept the model in place "because we care, and people know that". Most in the industry who have met him and the Concept III founder soon notice that they are different. "I have had to develop my own way of doing things," he says, "but I do it maintaining the same values that have come down to everyone in the company."

Thirty-five years on, David Parkes is still sharing those values and "still has the passion" his son says. This is why he maintains a hands-on role at Concept III and also why he invests time and effort in sharing his knowledge of textiles at events such as, recently, Techtextil North America in Atlanta, where he took part in a lunchtime panel discussion on testing technical textiles for use in sports and outdoor apparel. And there are still plenty of innovations for him and everyone at Concept III to champion and usher into the marketplace, including ideas for using fibreknit and pile fabrics. There is plenty more to come.



David Parkes founded Concept III 35 years ago, just as outdoor apparel was emerging as a category in its own right.

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