Zipping along on the crest of a wave

The fabric technologists may have worked out the subtleties of ebb and flow in terms of moisture control but their work can literally unravel if the clothing components don't work in harmony. Especially the outer layer. If a zipper fails, for instance, their theories are shot full of holes—through which overwhelming amounts of moisture will come cascading, overwhelming all their clever concepts.

In recent years, zipper manufacturers have been exercising their talents to produce waterproof zips, often relying on the backing tapes to provide the necessary protection. The engineering of the zipper, however, has become a matter of interest, too. At this point, thoughts should turn to the Swiss, with their heritage of fine engineering and metal work based on years of experience in the development of precision watches. Why not translate that ability into high-performance zips?

That's just what Riri SA, the Swiss zipper maker based in Mendrisio, has done and is now riding a very successful wave of increasing sales for its high-tech products alongside its well-established fashion business. It could be said that the company is in full sail towards fresh markets.

All thanks to Alinghi

It was back in 2001 that Riri decided to enter the outdoor and sailing market when a new (and unlikely) Swiss syndicate decided to challenge for the America's Cup via the Louis Vuitton Cup and so the company found itself with the most visible test-bed imaginable for its new waterproof zippers and Swiss precision engineering. With Switzerland being a landlocked nation and with no naval heritage it might have been seen as a rather doubtful bet upon which to gamble so much corporate and brand prestige. In the event, it turned out to be a winning ticket. The preliminaries were raced for through 2002 and the yacht made it to the semi-finals, winning that race to the sound of celebratory cow-bells. After its next victory in January 2003 it was cow-bells, flags and champagne corks. All that work was just to win the Louis Vuitton Cup, which gave the syndicate the right to challenge for the America's Cup which was contested off New Zealand in February that year. For the rest of Europe's yachting fanatics, it was slightly ironic that it was a Swiss team that brought the America's Cup back to Europe after a mere 152 years of waiting and agonising failure.

There was no hint of embarrassment at Riri, however. Its partnership with Alinghi had paid off and its innovative Storm waterproof zipper had come through with flying colours.

By the end of 2003, it had seen group sales exceed Sfr70 million (about $60,675,000). While fashion may have been the starting point for the company, investment has been focused on other sectors and its High-Tech line of zippers should represent about 30% of sales within the next three to four years. Brand-building is seen as prerequisite in the sports and performance

The Alinghi team preparing for the America's Cup at their Mediterranean training base.

Th. Martinez / Alinghi

business and Riri has been busy developing co-marketing activities with a number of leading names in the business on both sides of the Atlantic.

High resistance properties

By February 2004 the High-Tech product range, in particular the Storm zip, had won a prestigious second place in the Swiss Technology Awards, a prize given for advanced technology and innovation. Not surprisingly the zip is covered by a host of worldwide patents. The Storm zip has an impressive set of resistance properties among which are its water resistance, or in this instance the tightness of the Storm chain, to a high 1.7 bar (or more than 25 psi); it's resistant to domestic washing of between 40°-60°C; resistant to dry cleaning and to UV according to the Xeno test. It is also claimed that one of its advantages is that it's the only zipper on the market capable of combining very high waterproof performance with easy product handling.

The company also has its Decor UV, a UV-resistant nylon injection moulded zipper, with which it has been able to further develop its US market penetration, working in the marine canvas market. It is also being targeted at industrial and military tents. Despite being more expensive than the competition, quality producers have been quick to recognise its benefits. As a result, Riri's annual increase of sales in the US which had shown a modest increase in 2001 (4.53%) and 2002 (3.3%) saw its 2003 sales explode by a whisker under 57%.

More development under way

Despite its success in the Louis Vuitton and America's Cups, the company still sees Storm as being in its infancy. The technology in the zipper means that companies will be able to manufacture waterproof, breathable jackets while eliminating the extra flaps and covers needed to protect so many current zippers in the market. One can foresee even manufacturers of fishing and hunting waders producing styles that are easier to put on and take off while retaining full function by using the Storm concept. The opportunities in watersports as a whole must be tempting. W L Gore has given it the thumbs up, too, and it is now officially approved by that company for use with garments structured with Gore-Tex. The implication for the sports and military sectors is clear. It has already been tested an very low temperatures and in collaboration with La Sportiva, the zipper has performed on Himalayan peaks.

The next ispo should also see the presentation of an ultra lightweight Storm, twice as light and smaller than the usual Storm which has been developed specifically for pocket zippers in sports-focused garments. As part of its move into the sports field, Riri will also be a sponsor of the exhibition's BrandNew area.

The company is putting even more effort into development and is now working on its Extreme project. This will be a 100% waterproof product which will allow Riri to further expand into the outdoor market, specifically the dry bag and dry suit business, as well as nuclear, biological and chemical protective products for the US military. It is anticipated that this development will be launched at ispo summer 2005 when it should be making a big splash with some of the top names in diving.

Production in 2003 totalled 24.725 million zippers, running out at more than eight million metres. Overall, the company, which was founded in 1936, has some 6 million combinations of models, colours and tapes on offer - but is still able to offer a bespoke service in case you cannot find what you want… although one could be forgiven for thinking that, somewhere in its 850 colour range, you would find just what your design called for.

