

As the yoga trend shows no sign of abating, brands offering yoga apparel are going from strength to strength. But it's the multi-functional clothing that is proving the most popular.

The rise of yoga-wear

Once upon a time it was acceptable to go to the gym in an old t-shirt and sweatpants. Not anymore: the times have changed, and work-out fashions along with it. Stylish, performance-driven sportswear has become standard, with companies such as Canadian yoga-wear brand Lululemon Athletica leading the way. In fact, the trend for stylish gym-wear is increasing spectacularly, with Lululemon recently reporting 2011 revenues of \$1 billion, up from \$712 million the year before.

Style is certainly something that the everyday gym-goer has become more bothered about in recent years, but the other important factor in the increasing popularity of brands such as Lululemon is multi-functionality. Sweat-wicking apparel that stretches in the right places but also looks good enough to wear at a café afterwards is what consumers want, and the brands offering clothing with these functions are coming out on top.

Jessica Edwards, international community manager at Lululemon, says the company deliberately focuses on the versatility of its products. "We are committed to creating beautiful and technical product using innovative features, fun colours and patterns and revolutionary fabrics. Our designers focus on the fit of the garment, and versatility so that athletes and yogis can use the product for several functions."

Finding the right fabrics to fulfil Lululemon's requirements is key, which is why the company regularly sends numerous representatives to international trade shows. "Lululemon is known best for our revolutionary fabrics," says Ms Edwards. "Sourced from all over the world, we continue to push the boundaries of traditional textiles by offering blends that not only look good, but perform exceptionally well for all different kinds of activities. Originally we designed with only five or six different kinds of fabric, and now we have over 20 different variations."

The Choclo Project is an Australian company specialising in yoga apparel, and donates 5% of its profits to an orphanage in Peru. (Choclo means 'corn' in Peru).

 The Choclo Project

Yoga-proof

The main requirements for yoga apparel are wickability and stretch – as well as style. For Lululemon, the fabric used in a yoga top will have different properties than that used in clothing for a more demanding activity. “We choose a particular fabric based on the intended fit and function and expected impact,” says Ms Edwards. “For instance, we choose to use ‘luon,’ our signature fabric, for a lot of yoga apparel because it is wicking, offers four-way stretch, is pre-shrunk, and provides great coverage. But we’d choose ‘luxtreme’ for more energetic activities because it is our fastest wicking fabric that is perfect for sweaty exercise.”

Part of the brilliance of yoga-wear, and key to its rising popularity, is that it doesn’t need to be exceptionally high-performing. For this reason, designers have more flexibility and can work with a wider variety of fabrics to create stylish pieces that appeal to professional yoga instructors and once-a-week practitioners alike. Textile technology company Schoeller recently launched a new range of fabrics specifically aimed at the yoga and Pilates apparel industries. A major part of the fabrics’ appeal, according to Dagmar Signer, marketing communications executive at Schoeller, is their multi-functionality. “The idea behind the Schoeller ‘sense’ range was that when you go to the studio to do yoga or Pilates, directly afterwards you might go to do some shopping or to the cinema, and you want to feel a little bit more dressed. Schoeller only do woven fabrics, we don’t do any knits – and wovens are a little bit more durable and dressy. They’re for people who, on one side, are looking for more specialised materials, but on the other side want their clothing to be multi-functional.”

On launching the range in January this year, Schoeller said the fabrics were for “people who want to look good while engaging in indoor sports as well as out around town.” The sense fabrics can be used to make pants, jackets or tops and there is a wide palette of different lightweight fabrics in polyamide, Lycra, polyester, microfibres or cotton blends. Specific examples include an ultra-light, semi-transparent, elastic polyamide fabric, an elastic cotton-polyester blend with sparkling silver yarns to “ensure a sophisticated look as one-layer or two-layer bonded fabrics with jersey on the inside”.

There are also polyamide bicolours with mélange effect in shades of green, blue, grey and brown. They come with water and dirt-repellence, based on Schoeller’s NanoSphere technology and stretch comfort. Other fabrics have bonded soft-shell qualities in light lilac, vibrant orange or dark navy blue with jersey inner lining to offer wind and weather protection before and after training.

“There are a lot of companies like Lululemon and I think they have new products, new styles, new ideas and we think that this could be a good opportunity for this new line,” says Ms Signer. “We have already sold our mountaineering fabrics to this area. They have a very tough waterproof finish, and therefore the feeling on the skin might be too tough, so we wanted to create something more soft and smooth, lightweight, with good performance in terms of durability and so on.”

Alternative no more

Mainstream sportswear brands are also paying close attention to the trend for stylish yoga-wear. Chinese brand Li Ning launched a collaborative yoga-wear collection with designer Vivienne Tam during last year’s Asia Fashion Week, and Stella McCartney’s yoga apparel for adidas has been popular for the last decade.

But the movement towards yoga-wear is also allowing smaller brands to garner more attention. A heightened awareness of global issues among consumers means that more people, especially yoga practitioners, are seeking out clothing produced by “ethical” and “green” companies. An example of a clothing company that is trying to marry desirable yoga-wear with ethical thinking is the Choclo Project. Founded in Australia in 2010 by brother and sister team Roland and Jessica Wimbush, the brand works in partnership with orphanage Nuevo Futuro



Canadian brand Lululemon recently reported revenues of \$1 billion for 2011, thanks to sales of its multi-functional yoga-wear.

 Lululemon



Stella McCartney has been designing yoga apparel for German brand adidas for a number of years.



(New Future) in Lima, Peru. The Choclo Project won the ispo BrandNew award 2012 for social awareness, because it donates 5% of its sales profits to the orphanage. Roland Wimbush has a background in design, and decided to start Choclo to combine his passions for sportswear and philanthropy. "He saw the poverty in Peru and the issues with child abandonment, and wanted to see if he could do something about it," says Jessica Wimbush. "His skills were in the area of clothing and sports design so that's where the concept came from."

Clothing by the Choclo Project is designed to "take you from the yoga mat or gym, to go check the waves, or grab a coffee – the backdrop could be a city, a town, the ocean or the mountains," according to the brand. The more casual items of clothing are made of bamboo viscose and cotton, while the technical pieces use Invista's moisture management fabric, Coolmax.

Choclo clothing is manufactured in Portugal, which is one of the reasons the brand is branching into Europe. "It's an area that we can be close by to and also from a quality and fair-

trade point of view, we can monitor the conditions and make sure that everyone's getting what is considered fair and reasonable. We wouldn't want to be helping the children on one hand and doing something less helpful on another," says Ms Wimbush. "We're trying to do something a little bit different and our vision is really to grow the brand, to help more kids. In two years through the sales of the clothing and through fundraising we've raised €10,000 which has gone straight to an orphanage."

The Choclo Project collaborates with artists to design its yoga-wear, and often the clothing is decorated with prints inspired by what the children at Nuevo Futuro have drawn. "It's not yet cemented but our mission is that we can take artists to Peru and illustrate to the children that they can use their creativity in a way that may provide an income for them or a positive future to provide opportunities," says Ms Wimbush.

Here to stay?

Anyone who follows the stocks and shares will know that Lululemon has had a hard time convincing the market that yoga-wear is more than just a passing trend. But the brand has plans to launch an aggressive international growth campaign that would more than triple its current store count.

The brand finished fiscal 2011 with 174 stores, up from 133 at the beginning of the year. Analysts believe that number could eventually grow to more than 600.

"It is clear that Lululemon's customer base is rapidly growing, and new product flows are very well received," D.A. Davidson analyst Andrew Burns said in a report following Lululemon's fourth-quarter earnings release.

"Too many people still view Lululemon as a hot fashion fad," said John Kernan, an analyst at Cowen & Co. "But their store economics are as good as anyone in retail. They are phenomenal operators. They make one of the most unique, technically innovative products in terms of design, fit and functionality. They are much more than just a fashion brand. There is competition, but Lululemon's rivals still haven't figured out how to compete in the premium price point."

While this may be true, it won't be long before other yoga-wear brands start sprouting up to compete head-on with Lululemon, so it looks like fabric suppliers such as Schoeller and Invista have their work cut out for them. 

Lululemon has a reputation for using innovative fabrics to produce high performance garments.

