

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY

Footwear brands are finding insole technology an effective and affordable way to offer product innovation and win consumer loyalty.



Insole secret is out

The Hot Lap from Oakley's motorsports collection is one of the shoes that will have OrthoLite insoles inside.

 Oakley

Towards the end of last year, OrthoLite, a Massachusetts-based provider of open-cell foam insoles, added Oakley to its list of high-profile clients. The insoles will now be featured in Oakley's outdoor, golf and motorsports styles.

Oakley's footwear programme manager, Jeff Alton, said on announcing the deal that the OrthoLite products would help his company ensure "quality, comfort and support with each step", and added: "OrthoLite's dedication to offer breathable, moisture-wicking and long-lasting comfort insoles aligns with Oakley's desire to provide the most comfortable and best performing footwear possible."

It says a great deal for the importance Oakley is putting on this particular footwear component these days that OrthoLite will have its logo on the soles of the brand's shoes.

Internal benefits

According to Pam Gelsomini, company president at the insole manufacturer, insoles are often a forgotten footwear component because they're out of sight most of the time. But companies are paying closer attention to them now precisely because they have direct contact with the wearer's foot and, therefore, contribute greatly to stepping comfort, controlling the build-up of moisture and heat, and the overall environment the foot experiences inside the shoe.

The days of appearance counting for everything have gone, she suggests, with brands and retailers finding that footwear that offers immediate and lasting comfort is making a big impression on consumers, often turning them into loyal, repeat customers.

Also, these are days of increased consciousness of the importance of foot health,

with conditions such as diabetes determining decisions on which shoes people will buy. OrthoLite also supplies some foams for specialty insoles for diabetic sufferers that, Ms Gelsomini says, can help reduce the risk of dangerous foot ulcers developing by evening out pressure across the foot. Medical applications is an important area of growth for her company, she adds.

This should also help increase awareness of the benefits insoles can bring. OrthoLite sometimes describes itself as the footwear industry's 'best-kept secret', but you get the impression from talking to Pam Gelsomini that it doesn't really mean it. She says: "It's kind of a funny term. I'd say we certainly are well known in the footwear industry now, and among retailers too. The co-branding we're doing with Oakley is an idea that has already worked with Merrell, New Balance, Brasher and others. So we're becoming less of a secret; people are getting to know the name."

Outdoor appeal

As well as those mentioned above, the roster that Oakley has now joined includes names such as Asics, Nike, adidas and Teva, which is a testimony to the importance of the outdoor and sports markets to OrthoLite. "We made our niche in running," says the company president, "and pretty much all the running-shoe brands are using our products in their high-end lines. This has trickled down into shoes for trail-running and, from there, into footwear for other outdoor activities."

What these companies like about the specialist technology her company can offer is, she insists, that there is a whole "family of foams" available. Lazy OrthoLite, for example, is a foam made from virgin polyurethane with antimicrobial agents added in. It offers softer, slower recovery and greater stepping comfort. The X40 on the other hand offers high-rebound cushioning and a 40% elasticity rating.

"The point is that customers can look at the line and customise their product," Ms Gelsomini continues. "They can use a combination of different foams to create an insole that meets their particular needs. It might be that they want really high stability in the heel for a trail-running shoe, because of torque, then something different in another part of the insole. Companies like Timberland, Asics and Nike all combine different OrthoLite foams together to create their own individual performance stories, separating their technologies from their competition. It means our insoles own attractive for performance reasons, but also for customisation; footwear brands can use this to create their own technology and use it in their own marketing."

Insole or in-sock?

A degree of confusion sometimes arises over the use of the term insole. For example, insoles cut from insole board are always called insoles whereas moulded foam inserts are sometimes also referred to as insoles or in-socks. There is, however, a distinct difference.

An insole is the base on to which the upper is lasted before the sole is attached. It is usually cut from cellulose board, a non-woven or leather depending on the construction being used and forms an essential part of that construction.

An in-sock is a secondary insole that is either combined to the top surface of the insole proper or inserted into the finished shoe as a separate component. It is in no way an essential part of the shoe's construction.

Moulded foam insoles therefore clearly fall into the latter category and a clearer description would be footbed as this more accurately describes its true nature and function. 

Direct appeal

One of the first brands to make a great deal of its relationships with OrthoLite was Salomon, but the French company took an unusual approach by displaying the insole manufacturer's logo more prominently than its own. This raised awareness among consumers, and even led some to Google the company's name and make direct contact, asking to buy insoles on their own for other shoes they owned. OrthoLite has taken these comments on board and is preparing a response.

Work with footwear brands will, of course, continue. The economic environment is tough for everyone, which means these may not be the best times to expect to keep investing in new technology. Ms Gelsomini mentions that one brand did recently pull OrthoLite insoles from its new collection. When members of its own technical team stepped into the shoes, the difference was immediately obvious to them. They insisted on putting the OrthoLite insoles back into collection to improve the comfort level of the new shoes.

She explains: "We are being affected by the economy, for sure, but even though there is an upgraded cost in putting OrthoLite insoles into a shoe, it's not dollars—it's not that significant. Adding an OrthoLite insole is a very easy way for brands to upgrade their product for maybe, five, ten or 15 cents per pair. So you can have all that performance and comfort without spending too much. Upgrading the outersole or the quality of the leather you use are much more expensive ways of doing that. We are not that scary. Plus, because of the different formulations we can offer, if companies want to save money, there are options from multi-density molded insoles to single density insoles that are available in a wide range of prices, with all the same performance benefits." 



 OrthoLite