

FOOTWEAR TECHNOLOGY: DOW & UNDER ARMOUR

Shoes with a “zero-gravity feel” have helped sports brand Under Armour make a good start to 2018.

HOVR helps Under Armour bounce back

Sports brand Under Armour, which has been under pressure since 2017 from investors who are keen to recover past financial glories, has been true to its promise to “accelerate footwear development”. Its new HOVR cushioning system has featured prominently in its efforts to inject new life into its shoe business. On announcing the development in November, chief operating officer, Patrik Frisk, said the new technology would give runners a “zero-gravity feel” in their shoes and that he looked forward to the launch of the cushioning system in products in the early part of 2018.

Sold out

Sure enough, its first-quarter launches included new, HOVR-enabled versions of its Phantom and Sonic running shoes. Chief executive and co-founder, Kevin Plank, said the brand had aimed “to drive a technical cushioning story” for the running category with this launch. He added that using the new system in this way would increase brand awareness and give Under Armour “deeper credibility” with runners. He even said he hoped it would “convert” some runners to his brand from rival suppliers of shoes. It seems to have worked well. The new versions of the Phantom and Sonic shoes quickly showed as

Extensive field testing and close co-operation allowed Under Armour and Dow to develop the HOVR cushioning system together.

 Dow

having sold out in many sizes and colours on Under Armour's own e-commerce sites and those of retail partners such as Foot Locker.

Where the demand is

This contributed to overall results for the quarter that included essentially flat revenue in North America of \$868 million, which Patrik Frisk described as "better than expected". There was good growth in revenues, however, in Europe (up by 23%) and in Asia Pacific (up by 37%). Revenues for the quarter in those two regions were \$127 million and \$116 million respectively. Shoes incorporating the new cushioning technology may have played a part in helping Under Armour grow in China. Its own stores and its third-party retail partners there received the largest allocation of the new HOVR-empowered shoes at the time of the launch because the brand was confident consumers in that market would embrace the new technology quickly. "This is a testament to knowing our consumer and their demand profile," Mr Frisk says.

The promotional campaign for HOVR was a global one and was, the first time in Under Armour's history, a completely digital campaign, but the chief operating officer says that investing in "areas with the highest rates of return" was also part of what the company was trying to do. With regard to the shoes selling out, he makes it clear this is "not necessarily a bad problem to have", and is arguably not one that Under Armour has often had to confront in recent seasons. "It was a success wherever we launched the product," Mr Frisk continues. "Of course, the intent is not to always be sold out, but it's certainly part of the game here." Brands selling luxury bags are old hands at this game, deliberately encouraging high demand for a limited-edition product and cashing in on the exclusivity. These companies know, though, that only a high-quality product will sustain the excitement.

Energy return

The HOVR midsole is made of a proprietary foam compound, developed jointly by Under Armour and researchers at chemical group Dow. Another component of the system is what Under Armour calls 'Energy Web', which consists of a mesh fabric that wraps around the cushioning core to deliver "strong responsiveness" and energy return. This is designed to absorb some of the impact on the athlete's body, increase comfort and reduce fatigue.

"Under Armour's focus is on innovation," says Imran Munshi, marketing manager in Europe for Dow's elastomers business. "It was looking for the best cushioning and energy return it

could achieve along with exclusivity for the material, so we've worked together to find the right balance of those things and this formulation is exclusive to Under Armour."

He says Dow is achieving progress in its work on footwear materials, such as its Enerlyte polyurethane (PU) elastomer, because it is now able to offer greater flexibility. Its use of chain shuttling polymerisation allows it to blend hard and soft segments and design the polymer to suit the performance criteria needs of each customer. It has been working with Under Armour for a number of years, with the sports brand already a successful adopter of Dow's Infuse copolymer foam technology. Previous foam technologies it had tried in athletic shoes tended to compress after the wearer had walked or run 100 kilometres, Mr Munshi explains, but Infuse does not; instead, over time, it will allow a shoe to recover around 95% of its original shape. The new formulation incorporates these benefits and takes energy-return up from the levels that brands have been able to achieve using more traditional material combinations, which the Dow elastomers marketing manager puts at 54%, to levels of around 65% with HOVR.

"What we want is to understand what brand owners are looking for," he says, "in terms of lightweight properties, energy retention, retention of shape and comfort. In this case, we carried out a lot of field testing with Under Armour and we have built this formulation together." 



A Phantom running shoe incorporating HOVR. Shoes with a "zero-gravity feel" helped Under Armour steady its performance in the first quarter of 2018.

 Under Armour