

University of Cincinnati Sees Opportunity

Designing Activewear for the Lively Baby Boomer Market

The growth of the activewear market will continue as the Baby Boom, or the actively aging, generation moves through its golden years," notes Phyllis Borcharding, coordinator of fashion design and product development at the University of Cincinnati (UC). "This Baby Boomer market is opening a new opportunity for technical fabrics and apparel companies. Manufacturers and designers need to listen carefully to this user, and develop textiles and activewear that meet their needs!"

Borcharding underscores the theme of a recent study conducted by the University of Cincinnati. The in-depth research project allowed students a working knowledge on the activewear apparel needs of the "actively aging" generation, and insight into appropriate technical textiles for this market.

Project Motivation: The inspiration for the University of Cincinnati's study came from a professional relationship between Borcharding and Jane McCann, director of smart clothes and wearable technology at the University of Wales, Newport, United Kingdom.

Borcharding explains, "I was very interested in the "Innovative Smart Wearable Clothing for the Aging" study that Jane was part of in the UK. I told her about our research methods class, and I asked her if the class



could be involved in the project in some way."

As it turned out, the University of Wales hadn't looked at the project in terms of examining the different categories of women in this market, and projecting how to design for active aging women. So, UC's research and methods students became the contributors to this part of the research.

The Research: Borcharding designed a class research project centered around the needs of active adult women over the age of 55, who walk for exercise at least three times a week. The plan was to educate UC's design students and product developers about this rapidly growing market of baby boomer users. The class was to look at the needs of walking women who pursue the walking activity for both exercise and socialization.

The eight students in the research methods class developed a profile background of the "active aging" woman, and analyzed her walking activity. They conducted focus groups, and identified six different female walking personas, ranging from the moderate walker, to the active walker, to the intense walker. They also looked at the importance of social interaction, as well as the health issues associated with "actively aging" women.

The Study Results: According to Borcharding, the women were all passionate about walking, but were frustrated that no one company, in their eyes, was designing for their age group. The women would love to have product that was designed specifically for them. She states, "Overall, their reaction was that they had to use everyday casual apparel for walking, because it fit them better than any activewear garments on the market."

The women interviewed identified specific user needs for an activewear garment in terms of design, materials, and fit that would meet the needs of consumers like them.

According to Borcharding, UC's experience with the project was very positive, and UC is planning additional similar projects. She says, "The students enjoyed learning about this age group and their lifestyle. While most students today, along with the industry, tend to design for ages 40 and younger, I feel the project has given us a research base that we can build on for the future."

As a result of the project, three UC students chose this market and activewear as their senior thesis project. However, the students encountered technical fabric acquisition problems. Borcharding explains, "Unfortunately, when it came to technical fabric selection for design development, all requests made to companies for sample yardages were denied. This study really emphasized the importance for the industry to establish a close connection with academia. The Baby Boomer generation is the future. It is such a large market in size that it would be economically viable for the industry to take notice of their needs." ●

For more information on the "actively aging" program, contact Dr. Phyllis Borcharding, phyllis.borcharding@uc.edu or 513-556-4801.

Kathlyn Swanko, president of the FabricLink Network, created TheTechnicalCenter.com for industry networking and marketing of specialty textiles, and FabricLink.com for consumer education about everything fabric.

The Networking Sites for the Textile Industry



Check out the opportunities to effectively get your message out!