



Kathy Swantko

Get the scoop on what's trending in fabrics and textiles for 2016 and beyond

➔ If you've ever been to a fabric or textile education session at Outdoor Retailer, there's a good chance you've heard from Kathy Swantko. For more than 25 years she's been a professional textile, apparel and fashion consultant, coordinating events at trade shows and providing education and research on her website FabricLink.com. Read on to see what she sees trending for 2016 and beyond, plus how brands are increasingly making their own investments in textile technologies.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE UP-AND-COMING TRENDS AND TECHNOLOGIES IN FABRIC AND TEXTILES COMING INTO OUTDOOR RETAILER SUMMER MARKET?

- ➔ There are quite a few, so I'll give a brief rundown:
 - High performance factors include lightweight fabrics, UV protection, cool-touch fabrics, moisture management and anti microbial functions.
 - Fine count merino wool blends and fine gauge merino knits blended with synthetic performance yarns.
 - Plaid looks and houndstooth checks.
 - Denims and chambrays with performance qualities.
 - Knits and wovens with brushed and sueded surfaces.
 - Soft touch and comfort feel, even for traditionally rigid anti-abrasion blends and compression fabrics.

AS YOU MENTIONED, SURFACE TEXTURES ARE A HIT, BUT THEY CAN SNAG; THEY CAN SOAK UP WATER; THEY'RE HEAVIER. HOW DO YOU SEE BRANDS ADDRESSING THESE PERFORMANCE ISSUES?

➔ The brands and apparel manufacturers are always balancing fashion and function, based on the end-use application. Surface texture is typically fashion-driven. Working to improve performance while understanding fashion trends is what drives sales and helps bring newness to a line.

For example, sliver (pronounced "sly-ver") knitting is a process that manufactures a fabric directly from fiber, without the interim step of utilizing a twisted or spun yarn for knitting the fabric. Sliver knitting locks individual fibers directly into a lightweight knit backing allowing each fiber to stand upright, free from the backing to form a soft pile on the surface of the fabric. This special knitting process makes cut pile fabrics that are comfortable to wear, softer, warmer,

more drapeable and more resilient than other fabrics woven or knit from yarns.

Lightweight surface interest performance fabrics can be created through fleeces and brushed surface finishes to provide many of the functional qualities that a particular end-use application may require. With the use of microfibers, many knit fabrics can be very lightweight. Warmth without weight is a key performance benefit of these fabrics.

WE'VE SEEN SEVERAL OUTDOOR BRANDS LIKE PATAGONIA AND THE NORTH FACE PURCHASE OR MAKE SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENTS IN INGREDIENT BRANDS TO DEVELOP NEW TEXTILE TECHNOLOGIES. IS THIS THE START OF A TREND OF BRANDS GOING MORE VERTICAL? IS IT A GOOD THING FOR THE INDUSTRY?

➔ Innovation drives the outdoor industry. Any innovation process leading to the improvement in the development of new cutting-edge fabrics is arguably a good thing. All apparel manufacturers look to the brands for new innovations. However, if a brand finds that they can grow their business and increase their competitive advantage by becoming more vertical and investing in an ingredient branding strategy to add value to its product's overall acceptance or popularity, it's a good thing, because it can increase the potential for new innovations. In this way, brands can control and direct their product development, as well as cut costs, which means a better value for the consumer. Also, to connect with consumers, brands need to create visible value. By going vertical and adding a branded ingredient or a branded component material, they can more clearly show the additional value of the overall product. Many brands have technology areas on their websites that explain their new technologies.

AS THE TECHNOLOGY OF NEW FIBERS, FABRICS, KNITS AND WEAVES GROWS, THERE'S A LOT OF NUMBERS, NOISE AND NAMES THROWN AT THE CONSUMER AS TO WHY THIS FABRIC IS BETTER THAN THE OTHER. HOW SHOULD BRANDS EFFECTIVELY GET THEIR MESSAGE OUT TO CONSUMERS AND RETAILERS?

In the broad sense, many consumer purchases of apparel items are still based on price. However, this is changing as consumers are learning that "You get what you pay for." Today, consumers have access to more unbiased information and reviews through the Internet and mobile devices than ever before. Education is the key for a consumer to become a "smarter shopper." It has always been the case that consumers who are buying performance apparel and gear are most influenced by learning about the technology that the product provides.

No one has the time to read a science report. However the truth is, there is confusion as to the value that a particular fabric provides. The important thing is to educate the consumer in the simplest way possible. Websites like FabricLink.com can provide consumer education on textile fibers and fabrics in a concise way. Utilization of unbiased sources for the brands can be an advantage to getting the key information about a new product out to the masses.

--DAVID CLUCAS