

Apparel

TECH

TRENDS

IN THE ACTIVEWEAR MARKET, 'SMART' APPAREL HAS TAKEN OFF AND THERE'S NO SIGN OF IT SLOWING DOWN.

BY ALICE WOLF,
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

What happens on the playing field stays on the playing field. Or does it? With customers requesting apparel that keeps them warm, comfortable, dry and able to perform at their best, garments that were once considered specialty items for athletes are finding their way into more common walks of life. The line between performancewear and its lifestyle counterpart — athleisure — continues to blur, as comfort designed for the yoga studio has made its way to the grocery store, the office and even date night.

One of the nice things about the comfort trend is how easily it can translate into wholesale sales. The promotional and decorated apparel markets, which lean on branding to make a statement, run the greatest chance of increasing visibility and dominance by putting their brand on comfortable clothes, like those in the performancewear and athleisure categories.





Performance-level fabrics are no longer confined to the gym.
Photo courtesy of EG Pro.



LOOK AT LAYERING

One current trend in both the retail and wholesale markets is layering.

Beginning in 2017, layering became a fashion statement seen on international runways. “The art of layering is something of a creative outlet, not to mention a canny way to rethink pieces already hanging in your wardrobe,” according to fashion writers at *Vogue*. “With the added consideration of ever more unpredictable weather to contend with, building a look which affords the opportunity to add or remove pieces throughout the day is rather appealing and surprisingly practical.”

De-structuring the layered look and seeing what elements are used under, over and left open presents an opportunity for wholesalers to offer clients individual items or the complete package. Practical on many levels, layering allows wearers to adjust their outfit as the weather dictates. Comfortable, casual and affordable, it is a style that became popular with athletes (think warm-up suits), that was picked up by youth (think untucked shirts and hoodies) and has worked its way into athleisure (think yoga apparel). It is difficult not to embrace a style based on comfort.

SKIN IN THE GAME

Beyond providing a higher degree of comfort, investment in the proper attire for sports and daily living also can contribute to performance, health and hygiene.

“Performance is no longer just moisture management,” says Matt Murphy, vice president of marketing at Russell Athletics. “Brands

have to help the consumer understand new functional attributes such as odor control, sun protection, stretch fabrications and compression. This was a priority with our newly designed website at Russell Athletic, including visual elements to help the education process.”

In educating your customers, who in turn must educate their consumers, be aware that there are two types of anti-wicking apparel.

Vince Winters, president of EG Pro explains the difference, which takes place at the manufacturing level. “The main difference is the use of hollow core fabric, where the moisture goes around and through the apparel, versus a chemical-based solution that is applied to polyester garments. Use of hollow core is the more costly method of the two, with a longer life span for the garment. An important thing to know, for those who sell the less costly, more affordable chemically treated apparel, is that the life span of those garments is 25 to 40 washes, depending on the quality of the solution.”

Winters also warns that the use of a fabric softener sheet tossed into a dryer will destroy the anti-wicking properties of the fabric and the value of the garment.

WHAT'S HOT

According to Winters, the hottest selling item at EG Pro right now is the quarter zip, which is perceived as a base in the layering process, and used in training, for warm-ups and on its own. He also finds that polos are popular as a dressier option.

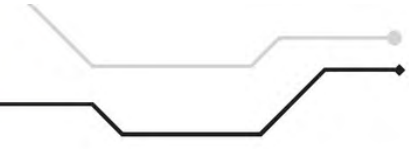
“We see a lot of examples of items that start out as performance-wear for athletes, then turn up as regular streetwear,” he says. “Why not just look good, but feel comfortable as well? While some price points will keep apparel at the retail level, we are always working on affordability, technology, comfort, price — and in many cases we do get performancewear trickling down to the blanks market.”

Over at Russell Athletics, Murphy says the T-shirt will continue to lead the performancewear category. “There are many low-cost

A New Poly Process?

Polyester has long been the dominant fabric in performancewear. Not only does it have the lightweight, stretch and wicking characteristics required of products in the category, but it also is adaptable to the cut-and-sew process.

Dave Wheatley, director of business development for Myogrid, says that on the higher end of the quality spectrum, Myogrid now uses a circular seamless knit process that merges polyester and nylon. This process produces a softer, anti-chaffing garment with built-in venting, and quicker wicking and drying, he says. — *Impressions archives*



options today driving higher volume,” he says. “The consumer will continue to want more as new features are added to the T-shirt, allowing higher prices and more profitable sales.” The quarter zip also is seeing success at Russell. “Our new Russell Athletic performance quarter zip is doing extremely well, as it is a nice transitional piece from office attire to a lightweight workout item.”

Compressing muscles for workouts or simply for day-to-day activity is growing in visibility and importance to the consumer. “Compression has surged with calf and arm sleeves, tights and other items,” Murphy adds. “These garments are marketed for better blood flow and recovery.”

EDUCATE THE CONSUMER

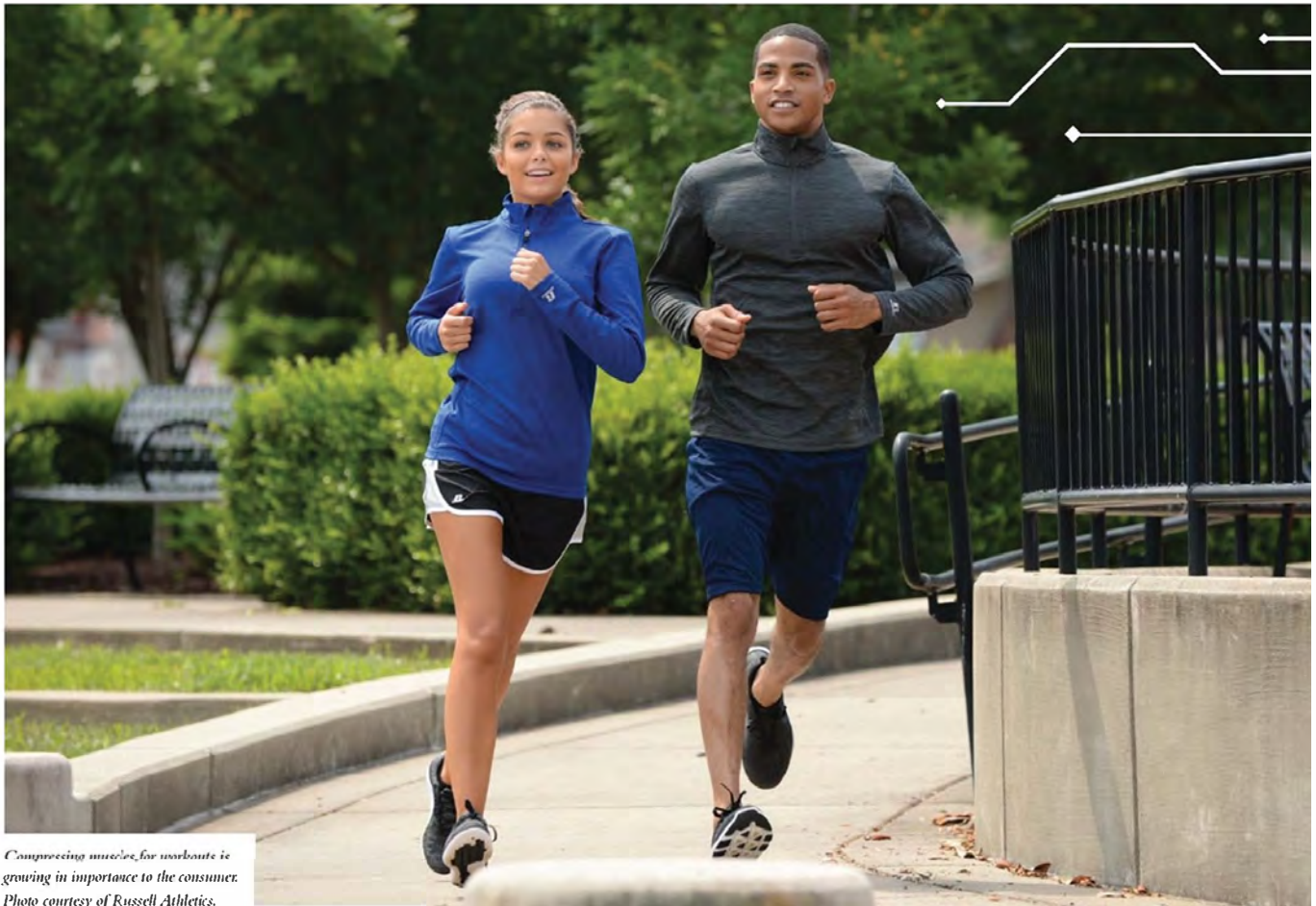
Decorators need to understand and effectively market apparel technology in order to succeed in its sales. “For decorators, the ‘front of the house’ is the place to do it,” Winters says. “The point of purchase [is] where education should take place. Use bullet points, videos, hang tags. Set up the performancewear apparel together with explanations and visuals that point to its value.”

When it comes to educating customers, Murphy adds that it is important to keep it simple and use visuals. “Your website must offer product detail that is easy to understand and where possible offer videos that can sell the products for you,” he says. “Direct-mail pieces that are highly visual are also effective, as are e-blasts to inform customers of something new and exciting.”

What it all comes down to is added value. “Why not feel comfortable in everything that you wear?” says Winters. “Especially when performance fabrics add enough attributes in new technology to enable a higher price point.”

ON THE HORIZON

At EG Pro, the business model involves a vertical approach, where all fabrics are engineered according to proprietary specifications for its retail and wholesale blanks divisions. “Research and development focuses on experimenting with the ‘next big thing’ in mind,” Winters says. “We have been testing with graphite on fibers at a macro level, which will in effect allow fabrics to trap and hold body heat with less bulk.”



Compressing muscles for workouts is growing in importance to the consumer.
Photo courtesy of Russell Athletics.

At Russell Athletics, Murphy is seeing performance attributes incorporated into all categories of apparel and he expects that to continue. “The race to innovate will be the primary growth engine in the future and we are already seeing new technologies at the retail level,” he says. “The category itself continues to evolve with how it is defined. Wearable technology built into apparel, sustainable fibers and fabrications, as well as workout recovery attributes, will be continuing trends. Blending athletic performance with lifestyle apparel also continues to drive interesting new ideas and sales opportunities.”

Teched-up clothing is everywhere at retail and as it becomes even more prevalent and affordable, its dominance in wholesale will be unstoppable. Its beyond-fit appeal continues to stir up excitement from team, activewear, spirit and athleisure customers, so be sure to stay abreast of developments to remain relevant to your customers in these markets. @

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