

What happens to a specialty industry that is built upon branded, third party technical materials and a cooperative, transparent business philosophy, when one or more major players decide to step away and go it alone?

I imagine bells were ringing in textile companies across the Outdoor Industry when Columbia outlined their future plans recently. Columbia has been a house branded materials company for some time, but they have taken an abrupt turn in how they want to be perceived by the remains of the traditional market, while they move to be closer to the all-powerful social media market and thus prepare for the inevitable limitless global expansion. Here's what they had to say:

"Apple is brilliant around presenting technology with simplicity... Our customers were telling us that life was already overwhelming and too complicated, and they just wanted buying and wearing decisions to be easy."

Mick McCormick, Columbia

The Apple model restated is, 'we're going to completely control the supply chain for products whose technical specifications we manipulate, while we advertise the bejesus out of them, flood the new media with stories about how happy our consumers are, and take home as much gross margin as possible.' You have to admit, it works well for Apple, as the modern consumer is willing to pay more for a seamless, simple and satisfactory solution. This is the underlying trend that Columbia is responding to in deciding to own every aspect of their product, and it has implications that are shaking the foundation of the Outdoor Industry.

The hyper-technical nature of Outdoor is an interesting mix of outrageous individual innovation and the commonality of branded materials. The industry has been built on the back of the mad scientist who makes fabrics that are amazing; both waterproof and breathable, lightweight and warm, they wick, repel, release, etc. The sheer breadth of fabric innovation in this industry is incredible and it has taken a lot of smart, hardworking people, in fabric companies spread across the globe, to make it happen. The outdoor brands have used these technical third party textiles as planks with which to build their lines, sometimes throwing in their own innovation or generic house-branded materials as price demanded, but by and large, their standing has been based on the credibility of their materials and the market position of the other players using the same stuff. It is like a big web that supports a lot of innovative individual companies through the commonality and integrity of everyone's fabrics. This makes life easier for the retailer, who shows specialty product that has enough points in common, like textile hangtags, that a consumer feels comfortable in making a judgment.

The problem is our culture is changing. The current consumer climate is all about friends, fans and followers. Social media, customer reviews and the ubiquitous star review system mean more to today's consumer than science does. The multitasking, distracted, time challenged outdoor enthusiast generally trusts brand over content, they no longer need, nor can pay attention to, another level of detail, for example, 'what kind of fabric is this made from' or 'what is the technical pedigree?' Everyone wants benefits and reputation, not numbers and graphs.

"We spoke to active Americans, and we videotaped them in their environment from inside their homes and as a result, they were brutally honest in what they told us... What blew us away is customers did not talk science or technology at all..."

Mick McCormick, Columbia

Wow, brutal honesty... the best kind. I believe what Columbia learned is; outdoor enthusiasts want to be comfortable in their apparel, no matter where they are, no matter what they are doing, and no matter what it is made from. It's that last part that is news to the industry, perhaps we don't need honest to goodness third party science and its gross margin drag after all.

Modern consumers, in all markets, want product that their peers have bought and are happy with. The internet and more importantly, internet retailers, hold the key to this democratization of consumption. Those retailers also hold enormous power, and what they see on the horizon is a future where increasingly the consumer trusts retailer over brand. Now however, we are watching both brands and retailers jockey for position as they respond to the change in wind direction that is sweeping across consumerism; access to social and experiential information.

So Columbia goes it alone, there will be no 'Intel inside' their product. They will bring to the customer a complete, contemporary market answer that is wholly owned and imagined by just one company, theirs. The omni-everything approach sets them up perfectly for the expected global expansion in their future. They can now spread out across a worldwide market, most of which is decidedly less technical than ours, without any excess baggage. And we get to witness another market struggle with the duality of modern technical thought, the solitary wizard, Apple, vs. the cooperative mind, Google. Or in this case, Columbia vs. the mad fabric scientists.

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## The Apparel Tech Center

The Apparel Tech Center will debut at The Running Event 2011 this winter with fiber and fabric suppliers presenting their latest innovations. Highlights include a morning seminar with a keynote speaker and a panel moderated by *Textile Insight* editor Emily Walzer on December 9, 2011. Designers will be treated to an informative walking tour of the expo floor exploring the many examples of apparel and footwear design with trend commentary and conversation along the way. ●

The Apparel Tech Center at The Running Event Expo, December 8-10, 2011 in Austin, TX. For more information contact Jeff Nott, [jnott@formula4media.com](mailto:jnott@formula4media.com) or visit [www.therunningevent.com](http://www.therunningevent.com).

## Sourcing USA

The U.S. Department of Commerce and MAGIC are hosting an Americas Pavilion and Summit – "Sourcing in the Americas" – to highlight the United States and Western Hemisphere supply chain network. "Sourcing in the Americas" will showcase apparel, footwear, fabric and yarn mills, trims/component suppliers, and service providers. This summit brings together the U.S. Department of Commerce's Office of Textiles and Apparel (OTEXA) and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), along with endorsement and support from major U.S. and Western Hemisphere textile, apparel and footwear associations. Obama Administration official Mr. Francisco Sánchez will be a keynote speaker. MAGIC runs from August 21-24, 2011 at the Las Vegas Convention Center. [www.sourcingatmagic.com](http://www.sourcingatmagic.com). ●