

Commentary / Kurt Gray

HIGH SCHOOL REUNION MEETS HIGH-TECH FLEA MARKET

The Outdoor Retailer Winter Market's biggest story was the change in dates and the phantom buyers. Big brands need a venue to show unfiltered brand presence, meaning all the product in all its glory. They need a big national stage and Salt



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Lake is perfect. However, the middle sized players and those with stable regional and demographic markets might look to shift their OR booth buying dollars to special buying group and rep shows, places where orders actually get written. It is an old sales concept, go to the customer and make it easy. Getting one's life organized around having a major trade show a few days after a major holiday is definitely not easy and the final verdict for ORWM will lie with those that did not attend. How did the buying season end up for them?

Below are my observations and things that came to mind as I drove from Salt Lake back home across Wyoming.

Political Activism: The emerging and very real threats to Federal lands have mobilized the Boomers to fight back.

Urban Outdoor Is Now the Master:

In the beautiful and heavily tailored and needled softshells and hoodies by The North Face one can see Vanity Fair's response to Mission Workshop/Nau/Veilance movement. We got this.

Ibex Fishnet: Finally someone gets the bio-physical advantage of fishnet underwear. Watch this rock.

Retro Modern Design Split: Now in addition to the obvious design paradigm between a light weight philosophy (carry-in-a-pack) and a heavy weight practicality (street), we see a widening gulf between the retro design (metal snaps) and modern design (waterproof zippers) camps.

Insulation: Anything that makes a jacket puffy is now being sold as insulation. The market interest is numbing with endless technical choices, and the insulation is out of sight when the customer buys the product at retail. Anybody remember the debacle of 'technical fleece'?

Alpha: On the other hand there is an "insulation" that doesn't win any metrics and still the users prefer it. There is much to be said for how technical fabrics wear on the body. It used to be called comfort.

Black Diamond Jacket Fabrics: It looks like the 1980s at BD. Flat, high count taffeta fabrics in the outerwear remind me of sleeping bags from the Reagan era.

Venture Out: Where everything is different, except, it's different all in the same way. Free of technical positioning, VO feels inspired more by Lewis and Clark than Patagonia.

Millet and Stitch Free Quilt Channels: Every now and then one sees true innovation. When we make a quilted insulator jacket, we stitch

those channels making thousands of little holes — little holes that let in wind and let out the insulation. Millet eliminated them and the results are stunning.

Stonewear's Sized Right Collection: This little company produced a wonderful line from a limited and tasteful combination of fabrics and silhouettes. The future is this kind of thoughtful collection.

Water Bottles: If any one category is big enough to break away from OR and form their own show, it is water bottles.

Gramicci: They made clothing that looks like the current OR-Attendee-Apparel-Uniform before most of the attendees were born. The subtle introduction of stretch in the line is brilliant.

Light Alpinism: Watch sticky winter rubber on the bottom of reimagined running shoes change a season and an industry.

Industry, activewear from Canada: Always pushing the women's active fashion envelope. A necessary design influence and they do it so well.

The Specialty Retailer's Mantra: "We help people get dirty. We have real outdoor experience and passion for getting people out. We don't focus on online sales, we don't discount gear, and we want to help people out with anything outdoors." Kevin Rosenberg, Gear to Go Outfitters, NYC.

Disclaimer: Mr. Gray thinks that a water bottle made out of steel is called a canteen. His opinions are not necessarily shared by the publisher, or anyone else who doesn't use a rucksack.