

Weather or Not...

The Lighter Side of Outerwear

BY CATHY GROVES

“Transitional” is the new outerwear. Contributing to the growth of this category is the unpredictable and often erratic weather patterns in our country coupled with a retailer’s difficulty to manage a high dollar outerwear department. Historically, outerwear has been a complex category due to labor and fabric intensive garments along with upper-end pricing. This has created a challenge at the retail level. Reacting in season is almost impossible and over-buying is a risk that can result in leftover inventory.

So manufacturers and suppliers began channel surfing—that is, discovering new distribution pipelines that would be appropriate for a newly created grouping of jackets called *transitional*. This is basic Marketing 101: If you give consumers new and exciting products, they will be anxious to buy them. In this scenario, offering fresh styles, new mid-weight innovative fabrics, high-tech fabric solutions, a compelling color story and longer seasonality has presented a new reason to buy.

In the beginning...

Experts would say that the transitional category had its roots in the snowboard and outdoor-lifestyle markets where the need for layering became a requirement. One can peel off or add layers as needed according to the temperature and look stylish while doing it. Lighter-weight jackets became the core item; while woven shirts, novelty knits and T’s, vests, specialty fleece and soft-shell pieces (the sportswear separates) added practicality and interest to the overall look.

As transitional outerwear has developed over the last decade, it has blended itself with sportswear departments and contributed to isolating pure outerwear to an item business. Everyone needs one winter coat, but transitional opens up the door for more than one purchase. These lighter-weight jackets find their place as multi-purpose clothing.

They are versatile, risk-averse merchandise which simply has a longer shelf life. Think of transitional outerwear as an insurance policy. These are jackets that can transcend regional climate challenges, price objections, fashion cycles and ensure a longer seasonality. It provides the retailer with add-on purchases of the layered pieces and other sportswear-related items.

Practical solutions

You will find that most transitional outerwear lends itself to basic silhouettes, while offering a new world of fabric options. Textured fabrics, novel linings and high-performance fabrics are some of the characteristics that define transitional. The new world of wind-proof, water-proof, soft-shell technology



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enables consumers to buy a versatile, high-quality jacket that can be used for many functions and through many seasons and various types of weather.

As the worlds of retail and ad specialty continue to collide with the popularity of branded apparel, it is easy to see why promotional wearables have evolved into the same retail trend of transitional merchandise as a practical vehicle. Our customers can use these lighter weight jackets for virtually any type of event, employee incentive, apparel program, award or uniform. These can be used at most any time of the year, in various regions nationally. As part of the pitch, you can point out that there will be a long lasting season to the use of the item and therefore their brand logo will be continually exposed. The price is more competitive and the chance of an add-on item such as a mid weight layered fleece piece or a cap is probable.

This presents a much longer selling season and will most likely open a wider variety of suppliers for you to choose from since the category is more manageable than its T-shirt and women's wear counterparts, to name a few. Therefore, it is important to search out vendors who are committed to the category and are professionals in managing year-around inventories for you to have available on a quick, as-needed basis. Make sure that the supplier is able to offer men's and women's companion pieces in traditional jackets, since gender-specific items have become such an important part of the promotional-apparel market. Usually the basic body style will look similar, but the Women's jacket should have a more tapered cut fit for the female body along with a few details to give it a more feminine touch. If other items are available, such as mid-weight fleece and a woven shirt, you can show a very attractive package and therefore up-sell your original single-jacket concept. A year-around supplier will also have coordinating color palettes which will enable you to present a beautifully merchandised package of apparel items.

And speaking of selling tips, why not layer the ensemble together on a sturdy wooden hanger to put on the wall of your showroom? And top it off with a cap that matches. It will entice the buyer to purchase the whole package rather than trying to imagine the finished product if it is shown as separates.

Forward thinking

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fabrics and body styles. High performance, bonded and treated fabrics will continue to evolve and become more important to end users. Technical features such as four-way stretch, water proof and wind proof fabric construction, anti-pill and anti-static technology will attract end users.

Another important fabric worth exploring is organic cotton. Due to the added costs involved in supplying certified organic cotton, these jackets are sure to be part of the transitional grouping with lighter linings and classic styling. With the increased availability of organic T's and fleece as the layering component, the demand is escalating for organic cotton jackets. Offering a sustainable mid-weight eco-option to your end user can position you as an innovative and creative problem solver. Major corporations are continuing to add social responsibility initiatives as a priority, therefore it is only natural that sustainable apparel will become increasingly visible and sought after as a promotional vehicle.

Our busy lifestyles and the multi-task world we live in demands versatility and value in the clothing that we choose. Transitional outerwear is a solid choice for your customers. It provides versatile and creative merchandising solutions for season to season, indoors to outdoors and day to night. **PR**



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