

BY SHARON LEICHAM

# f i t t i n g

## C H A L L E N G E

Finding the **RIGHT FIT IS A CHALLENGE** for women who fall outside standard sizing, and few within the industry are rising to meet the potential demand.

**J**oyce George is an outdoor sports enthusiast. She likes to hike, camp, climb and ski, but she's having a problem doing those things successfully. Why? Because she's 5 feet 8 inches tall, weighs 165 pounds, wears a size 16-18 and can't find technical outdoor clothing that fits because most outdoor stores (where she prefers to shop) don't carry her size.

Sandra Williams works for a manufacturer of outdoor sportswear in California, but can't wear the clothing her company sells because she's tall, 5 feet 9 inches, and thin. Pant and sleeve lengths are too short for Sandra. She shares office space with her assistant Cathy who is 5 feet 2 inches and 100 pounds. Cathy is luckier because many outdoor lines carry extra-small sizes, but she still has to shorten all her pants and sleeves.

Finding the right fit remains a problem for women of all sizes but particularly those that fall outside standard sizing: sizes 4-14, 5 feet 4 inches to 5 feet 8 inches tall. In 1941, the average woman was 5 foot 2 inches and 129 pounds. Today, she is 5 foot 4 inches and 144 pounds and wears between a size 12 and 14.

For those women who don't fit the industry standard, there are extended sizes: petite, plus and tall. Half of all women may fall into these special size categories.

The petite designation refers to women who are 5 feet 4 inches or shorter. Statistically speaking, that means approximately 55 percent of the adult female population in the United States—that's more than half of all American women—should be wearing a petite size. But just because someone is under 5 feet 4 inches does not mean they are petite in body. They may, in fact, be a petite-plus size (under 5 feet 4 inches but wearing a size 14 or above). And most outdoor manufacturers don't offer petites, arguing that the smalls and extra-small sizes will fit most short and tiny women. Oh really?

Then there are those plus-size women who wear a size 16 or larger (called plus or women's sizes). Plus-size women make up about half of the female American population. Women's Wear Daily reported that purchases of women's plus-size apparel grew over four times faster than purchases of women's apparel overall in the 12 months that ended in June 2005.

There is no ideal women's body type. In fact, body shapes tend to change significantly three times in a woman's life—around the ages of 20, 35 and 55. Aging, weight gain or loss, child bearing, menopause and the effects of gravity all work to contribute to the change in body shapes.

It's fair to ask what outdoor manufacturers are doing to accommodate the grow-

ing (physically and statistically) and aging population of women—many of whom really want to participate in outdoor activities but can't find performance outdoor clothing that fits. Is anyone answering the need, or is there simply not enough demand to warrant adding extended sizing to outdoor apparel lines?

### STEPPING UP

A search of catalogs and online sites reveals that there are a few outdoor clothing manufacturers that are, indeed, making plus-size clothing for women and, in some cases, petites and tall. Eddie Bauer, Columbia, L.L. Bean and Cabela's all offer extended sizing in select styles.

A year ago Columbia formed a focus group of 25 plus-size women of different ages and backgrounds to help it get into the mindset of plus-size women and find out what they want in their clothing. The focus group meets quarterly and reviews new lines, identifies key silhouettes and even wear-tests selected styles. And for the past eight months, the company has been working with a plus-size fit model.

"The plus-size fit model gives us the opportunity to offer consumers styles we know will fit their bodies," said Mollyanne Fleming, Columbia's outerwear merchandise manager. "For fall '06, we'll introduce more silhouettes and hipper assortments in extended sizes."

On the other hand, some small and medium-sized manufacturers find that adding extended sizes, especially plus sizes, to their lines is not economically feasible largely because of lack of demand, GearTrends® has been told. Apparel manufacturers have to meet minimum quantities in production, then manage and warehouse the SKUs. The more size "buckets" offered, the harder it is to forecast what to buy of each size. If the company does offer more size options, it's typically only in its best-selling or core items.

## IS THERE DEMAND?

An informal review of retailers from different regions of the country doesn't turn up any perceived or real need for extended sizing for women either. Jake Renz of Alpine Sports in Santa Fe, N.M., admitted that a couple of his female staffers are tall and have to buy men's sizes, but he said there have been no customer requests for bigger, tall or smaller sizes.

Kim Walker, owner of Outdoor Divas in Boulder, Colo., carries very little in plus sizes. "We carry larger sizes when we can, but they're hard to find," she said. "We want to accommodate as many women as we can, but we don't get demand for plus sizes."

Walker is able to fit more petite and tall customers with the Isis Lucy Pant in regular, petite and long, and the Leda pant from Verve with its XXS to medium size range. Moving Comfort, Burton and Sporthill also offer certain styles in longs and petites, Walker said.

Carolyn Cooke, co-founder of Isis for Women, asserted that her company has tried to offer these larger sizes, but retailers decline to purchase enough of them for Isis to make them. These retailers have said repeatedly they don't have customers in the larger range. Is it that women in that size

range really don't shop there, Cooke asked, or that they don't shop there since the stores don't offer the sizes they need? Meanwhile, as of 2006, Isis is adding XS and size 2s throughout most of its line because of demand. Cooke said she thinks that smaller women are more comfortable going to sales staff and demanding their size.

Perhaps outdoor stores don't make it easy and comfortable for plus-sized women to shop for clothing. Apparel industry research suggests that some plus-size women prefer to shop in private and online because the selection is broader and because of negative store experiences. Of the companies that offer plus sizing like Cabela's, store size dictates whether or not plus-size apparel is carried at retail.

"Unless you designate a plus-size area in the store, those items get lost," said Jennifer Burnett, Cabela's product manager of women's sportswear. "But we find that plus-size women don't really want their own area. They want to shop the racks that stock regular size clothing. Frankly, it's easier for them to find what they want on the Internet or in our catalog."

## RETAIL FIT SOLUTIONS

So what can outdoor stores do to accommodate larger, smaller and taller women


customers? Here are some suggestions:

» Pay attention to the women who shop the store. Are larger women browsing and not purchasing? Let the manufacturers know. They will begin to offer more sizes if they repeatedly hear the need.

» Ease into carrying plus sizes by bringing in extended sizes in core styles from vendors already carried in the store.


» Train store staff to know how every apparel line in the store fits. When clothing arrives, schedule a "try-on" session. Sizing can be very different between lines and sometimes within lines. Knowing this will help sales staff fit more customers. It may be that generously sized 14s and 16s will fit plus-size customers.

» Make sure there are female staffers on hand to help plus-size women, as Columbia said it has learned they prefer. Plus-size women said they feel they can be more honest with a female salesperson.

The outdoor industry needs to be more sensitive to the plight and needs of the plus-size Joyces, taller Sandras and petite Cathys who want outdoor clothing that fits, performs, keeps them comfortable and looks good. Is that too much to ask? 

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