



BY CHRIS HARGES

Although the garments they dangle from may be the real stars, hangtags are the supporting players that can help get the sale done. **ARE YOURS UP TO SNUFF?**

HANG TIME

They're not flashy and interactive like a website.

They don't have the commanding presence of a POP display. And they're not nearly as sexy as a full-page ad in *Outside* magazine. But the little cards hanging off a product on retailer sales racks may actually be the most important tool in a manufacturer's marketing mix. Hangtags and packaging play a crucial role at a critical moment in a product's life cycle. On-product collateral is always the last chance (and often the only chance) manufacturers have to speak directly to consumers. More importantly, hangtags offer those critical nuggets of information often under-trained and overwhelmed sales staff turn to when assisting a customer—or nuggets for the customers themselves when no one is there to help them.

PACKAGING THEORY

A consumer's decision to buy a product is a combination of gathering information and evaluating alternatives. The standard model describing the process goes something like this:

1. Recognition of a need: "I keep getting wet when it rains. I need a way to stay dry."
2. Information gathering: "There are a number of garments that repel rain."
3. Evaluation of alternatives: "Hmm. Trench coats are stylish, but these slickers have nice yellow hoods."
4. Choice: "A poncho is the thing for me."

Not exactly rocket science, and a little oversimplified in the way it's presented above, but knowing the basics of how a consumer makes buying decisions helps us understand how product packaging comes in handy in providing information to influence a buyer's thinking, especially at that pivotal moment of evaluating alternatives.

While a good hangtag can tip the balance in your favor, no amount of clever packaging can make up for a marginal product. In communicating with consumers, product will always be king. Key decision-making criteria such as style, color, fit and comfort can only be communicated by the product itself. Where good packaging can come into play is in influencing two other important criteria: product functionality and brand value—especially important in the outdoor market where

products are often sold on the merits of their features and their ties to authentic brands.

PACKAGING TACTICS

Like most marketing initiatives, the challenge is figuring out what to say and how to say it. The right solution depends on a solid understanding of what buyers look for within each product category and on a fair amount of marketing communication savvy to get the message across effectively.

Enough theory. Let's look at the choices made by four major brands in creating hangtags. We chose tags from four relatively comparable products: the Arc'Teryx Gamma MX Jacket, the Marmot Sharp Point Jacket, the Mountain Hardwear Synchro Jacket and the Patagonia Figure 4 Jacket. All are technical soft shells with retail prices between \$200 and \$250. We'll look at how the four brands address five of the most important types of hangtag content. And just to be really subjective, we've rated each brand on how well it performs using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 representing, well, a need for dramatic improvement.

USAGE DESCRIPTION

There are two schools of thought on the importance of telling consumers the intended use of a product. Some insist that consumers buy products to meet specific needs and that usage statements help them connect a product to a need. Others think that being so specific is just a bad idea. "Tell people a jacket is for mountaineering," they say, "and skiers won't buy it." This camp generally advocates providing only product features and letting the consumer make the connection between what a product does and how it can be used. For most products, the best approach is somewhere in the middle, telling consumers what the product can be used for without implying its use is limited to specific activities.

Proof & Promises



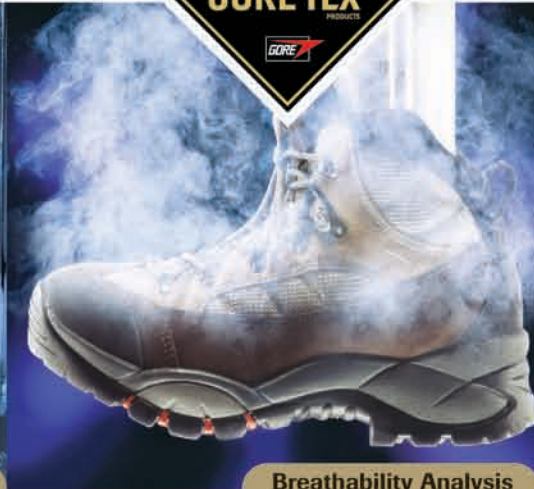
Footwear Flex Test

Simulates up to 200,000 steps under water to test for leaks and failure points.



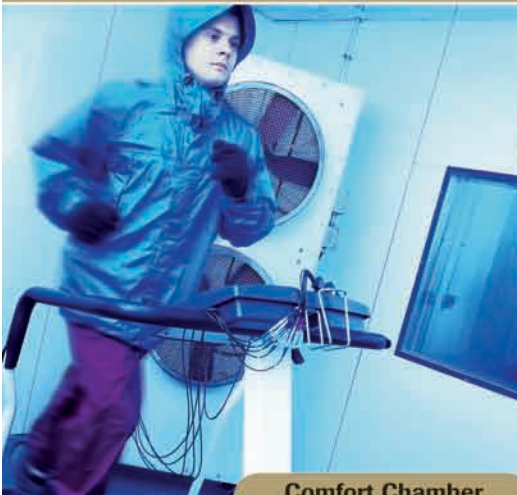
Footwear Leak Test

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Breathability Analysis

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ArcTeryx 3
Marmot 3
Mountain Hardwear . 1
Patagonia 2

Among our four brands, only Patagonia provides a specific usage statement and, boy, is it specific, almost too specific: "Durable soft shell for all-day technical climbing use." Marmot and ArcTeryx use broad descriptions of their soft shell collections to categorize their jackets as designed for cold-weather aerobic activities, giving consumers a good idea without narrowing too much. Mountain Hardwear is the least specific with no mention of possible uses.

MAIN SELLING POINT

Whether consumers are looking for usage statements or product attributes, they're seeking information and they want it quickly. By leading with the most important product attribute, packaging can grab their attention and tempt them to read further. With hard shells, for example, consumers want to know immediately if the jacket is waterproof. For these soft shells, the main selling point is that they are windproof, water-resistant and breathable.

ArcTeryx 2
Marmot 5
Mountain Hardwear . 2
Patagonia 3

Marmot leads with a single, simple point on the hangtag cover: "Windproof & Highly Water Resistant." Patagonia, as we saw above, has put its chips on a usage statement. It does, however, describe the jacket as "windproof, highly water-resistant and breathable" in feature descriptions. ArcTeryx is a little less clear, using the phrases "refreshing breathability" and "ample weather proofing."

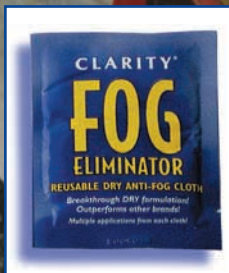
Mountain Hardwear strays even farther from a quick-hit selling point, hinging its pitch on the vague concept of "comfort and protection." A prominently placed descriptor on the inside of the tag calls the product "durable, comfortable, and weather-protective." References to the windproofness, water-resistance and warmth are buried in product features and a general description of the company's soft shell series.

SUPPORTING FEATURES

All tags include call-outs or bullets that describe the features of the jackets. For relatively expensive garments like these, specific feature descriptions help justify the products' more expensive prices.



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ArcTeryx 2
Marmot 2
Mountain Hardwear . 2
Patagonia 4

Surprisingly, only Patagonia explicitly links the product features with specific benefits to the consumer. Without mention of a benefit, the inclusion of feature bullets like Marmot's "Angel-Wing Movement™" or ArcTeryx's "Zipper-Garages™" do little more than bamboozle readers with clever-sounding terms.

The tags differ widely in their approach to providing feature information. Patagonia's feature/benefit approach requires a short paragraph for each feature. Marmot, on the other hand, opts for a bare-bones list with just a few words for each feature. ArcTeryx is similar, though it adds some generic images as a sort of visual punctuation for certain bullets. "Water repellency," for example, is accompanied by a small image of water droplets beading on a fabric.

Mountain Hardwear stands out in its use of a product illustration and call-outs; however, because the image is a simple line drawing and because the call-outs do little more than link a feature with an area on the jacket, this approach adds no information and only limited visual interest. A line connecting the "Hidden Power Stretch® cuff" bullet to the jacket cuff, for example, clues readers in to what must be a high-level secret that a cuff is located at the end of a sleeve.

GENDER IDENTIFICATION

Even though most retailers merchandise by gender, we still find that consumers' single biggest complaint about shopping for outdoor garments is, "I can never tell which is a man's or woman's product." While the difference in style and color may be apparent to industry insiders, consumers are looking for help.

ArcTeryx 1
Marmot 1
Mountain Hardwear . 1
Patagonia 2

Nobody here offers much to help consumers navigating a sea of jackets to find gender-appropriate styles. No tags contain a gender identifier on the exterior other than the small type on the SKU sticker or price tag. And only Patagonia includes gender on the tag interior.

DESIGN IMPACT AND BRAND IDENTIFICATION

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quickly link the product with the brand, and provide a clear and visually pleasing medium for the marketing message. Understanding that design is an extension of brand helps explain why Burton and Bonfire tags look so different from The North Face and Mountain Hardwear. The brands are presenting specific personalities aimed at specific groups.

ArcTeryx	3
Marmot	4
Mountain Hardwear	3
Patagonia	2

All four tags do a fairly good job of presenting information in a relatively clear and attractive way. Patagonia, in keeping with its environmentally conscious positioning, uses a single color tag interior printed on a lightweight, recycled paper stock. Like the interior, the cover provides very little in the way of visual interest. Some consumers may deduce that the uninspiring design and materials may be a result of environmental concerns. Most, though, will just perceive the tags as cheap and flimsy.

Mountain Hardwear tags are more complex. Though somewhat stark, they include a combination of text areas, illustrations and an athlete image. Brand is first and foremost on the cover with a giant-size Mountain Hardwear logo although, oddly enough, the brand name does not appear. While many hardcore outdoor store consumers will recognize the little nut, Mountain Hardwear has lost a good opportunity to familiarize new customers with their brand. ArcTeryx tags are downright chilly, minimalist and text-oriented with the addition of a few small images that function almost as icons. Marmot tags are by far the most colorful and complex, and prominently position both the logo and the brand name.

CONCLUSIONS

While none of the four tags fail outright, they could all do a better job of helping consumers and store associates understand the benefits of each company's product. Like many other tags from competitors not reviewed here, these tags miss opportunities to persuade consumers that one company's product is the best of the bunch. Even more dangerous, these tags fall short in differentiating their products from cheaper jackets that consumers may perceive as nearly identical and much less expensive.

» For more information on strategies for focusing your brand and product message, contact Chris Harges at 415-371-1610 or chris@satellite-design.com—or go to www.satellite-design.com.

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