



An eye for innovation

David Parkes is famous in the outdoor industry for having brought many innovative performance fabrics to the global market. Before stepping down from Concept III, the company he founded in 1983, he takes time here to reflect on the evolution of the industry and to express hope that the next generation will continue his game-changing legacy.

From polar fleece, to wicking knits and Drytex, you've been instrumental in helping textile innovators bring new performance fabrics to market. What characteristics do these success stories have in common?

If I had to choose a single unifying factor, it would be passion, from the person introducing the product and from the brand bringing it to market. They also share a common understanding of the need to innovate. But introducing a new product to market also requires courage and commitment. This is the starting point of the performance textiles business, and it has been our core business for some 30 years.

DIALOGUE

David Parkes, founder of Concept III

How has the industry's approach to textile innovation evolved over the years?

The issue of sustainability, the introduction of regulations, and the supply chain disruptions of the last three or four years have changed the way companies work with their suppliers. Brands now have to tick a number of boxes before they can start working with a new mill or introduce a new product. In the past, I would show a fabric development and, if interested, a brand would order yardage, and we would build a relationship from there. Now, with compliance and certification processes, the onboarding of a new supplier has become a long process, taking three or four months. If a brand finds that the potential supplier doesn't meet its requirements, it is time wasted for all involved. There is still high interest

David Parkes (top centre) at Performance Days last October. As founder of Concept III, his mission for decades has been to develop next-generation performance fabrics for the outdoor industry.

CREDIT: CONCEPT III

in the next performance fabric that will make a difference. But it has to go through all the hoops in a brand's product-development process and supply chain management systems.

You remarked once that small companies have, for the most part, been the biggest drivers of innovation in the outdoor market. Is this still the case?

Smaller brands will be more open to innovation because they are looking for a differentiation point. They need an edge over the established brands and they need to develop a product that will make them stand out. The newer and smaller brands are also often very passionate about the environment. Looking back some 25 or 30 years, many outdoor brands were still very entrepreneurial, and many of them have now become big corporations.

After years of picking out new materials and technologies, in which areas do you still hope to see breakthroughs?

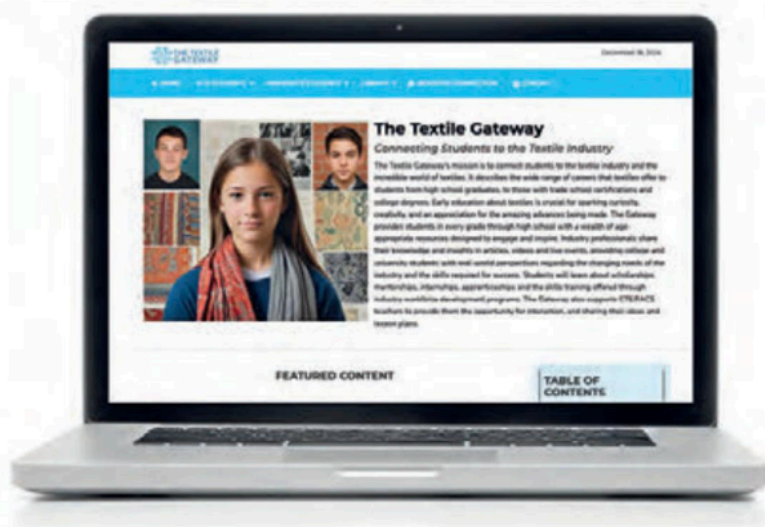
There has been much imaginative development in woven fabrics and I am sure this will continue, but knits now offer the most interesting challenge. Our community should work closely with yarn producers, product developers and brands to bring the next game-changer to performance apparel. There has been a great deal of textile innovation in the past 10 years, but we have not produced a game-changer that has catalysed success, as Gore-Tex, Thinsulate, ThermoLite-Coolmax, polar fleece, or Primaloft did. There have also been many new additives created to improve performance in wicking, odour management and so on. It is possible that many of these would not be compatible with today's sustainability standards.

There has been a trend in favour of natural fibres in the past few years – what is your view of their role in performance apparel?

There are certainly opportunities to address in natural fibres, particularly wool, but also in manmade cellulose and biomaterials. But I believe the sustainability story goes beyond the issue of fossil fuel fibres. I would like to see the uptake of natural fibres grow, but unfortunately, synthetics are an easier route to take, they have a strong and optimised supply chain, and the products do perform for the consumer. As for recycled fibres and circularity, there is still a limit to their availability. When it comes to textile-to-textile recycling, the industry needs to find a way to tackle this task collectively. Our business model is still very linear, it is about bringing a product to market, and then forgetting about it. If we want to bring it back into the loop, the industry needs to be made responsible for a product once it has been sold, and no one has ever done that. It means we may need a new business model. The industry is well aware of this and wishes to address this issue. But it is going to cost, and who is going to pay?

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DAVID PARKES, CONCEPT III.



Excess inventory appears to be less of a problem in the industry now. Do you think this will open up more possibilities for the design and development teams of brands? Do you think that a new cycle could be beginning?

We are all hoping for a new cycle and a new generation of passionate textile innovators. I fear that we are not attracting enough young people into our industry. I am working on a few initiatives to address this. I speak at universities and am involved in the Textile Gateway. This is a website for students to learn about the textile industry. We show them how a sherpa fleece is made, how a sweater is manufactured. We reach out to high school and university students to stimulate their interest in this industry. As for overproduction, at Concept III, we do not build inventories. We do not over-manufacture. We do, literally, make to order. I see that many textile mills have taken a very responsible approach to sustainability and to reducing their carbon footprint. They are directly affected by the cost of energy and of chemicals. Mill managers have been taking a very close look at every facet of textile production. Our industry is very much aware that it has had a major impact on the environment in the past and is actively working to address this. But if we continue to make the same product year in and year out, prices will continue to drop, and we won't be able to generate capital to invent new products. I still have a passion for product and for the industry. My frustration is that there isn't enough focus on bringing innovation to the consumer. For our performance apparel industry to prosper, innovation has to be the priority. 🌐

One of Mr Parkes' new side ventures, the Textile Gateway website has been set up to attract the next generation of product developers to the industry.

CREDIT: TEXTILE GATEWAY