

HOW TO Sell Style

Specialty Retailers Share their Apparel Secrets.

By Suzanne Blecher

Selling apparel can be a tricky proposition for specialty sports retailers. It can be costly to invest in a space where consumers are able to get great pieces for less money at big box establishments. Retailers face questions such as: “Which brands should I carry? How much floor space can I give over to apparel? What makes for a successful apparel strategy?” *Sports Insight* asked a few specialty retailers across the country to share the challenges and opportunities of selling apparel in our current marketplace. Here’s what they had to say...



Ridgefield Running Company / Ridgefield, CT
Megan Searfoss, Owner

What Consumers Want: “Technology and comfort. Stash pockets that hold larger phones and keys, but don’t take away from the style. Customers are looking for running or gym class apparel, but also for lifestyle clothes that will take them through the day. Price is important, but it is not the only factor. Guys hook into a line and stay with it, whereas women are more willing to try other brands to achieve a look.”

Best Selling Brands: “Vuori has made a big jump across both men’s and women’s. The brands that offer a soft touch and helpful technology are typically winners. Rhone and Tasc do well in men’s, whereas New Balance, Lululemon, and Oiselle are strong in women’s.”

Importance of Higher-End/Cross-Functional Apparel:

“It is great to see big brands like New Balance address this and nail it. Customers are really looking for something that they can almost spend the day in. With more people working out of their house and employers allowing business casual, apparel has become much more cross-functional. The smaller apparel only brands are spicing up traditional run style and offer a nice balance.”

Biggest Challenges: “I think too often our fitters are focused on the shoe part of the business. The time taken for the appropriate fit experience doesn’t allow the fitter to introduce apparel. This leaves the customer to have to browse on their own or not at all. Small brands are really strong on social media and make an impact. Our customer wants emerging brands and style, but for a retail store, it is hard to react since we are looking at product that is eight months away. That doesn’t allow us the flexibility to respond to what’s trending on Instagram.” ■



Miles Ahead Sports/ Sea Girl, NJ

Courtney Law, Buyer

What Consumers Want: “Most customers ask for run-specific items depending on the season, like good shorts for the heat, base layers for cold and run jackets for rain. Most other workout apparel is sold based on look and feel. We are lucky in that it does not seem that price is a deterrent in apparel sales. We are the educators and experts so our customers value our help when shopping at our store. In turn, customers are starting to become loyal to brands that we carry that we introduced them to.”

Best Selling Brands: “Our apparel focus has always been first and foremost on running apparel and accessories. We feature Nike, New Balance, Brooks, Sugoi and Saucony. We have carried these brands and had success pretty much since the beginning of our business 35 years ago. In the last three to four years, we have expanded our apparel selection to include Patagonia and PrAna for men and women. I try to buy mostly pieces from their active collections. Nike is still our #1 brand of apparel between men and women with Patagonia not far behind. Of the new brands, Beyond Yoga and Alo Yoga have been selling the best in women’s.”

Importance of Higher-End/Cross-Functional Apparel: “In the last one to two years, I have expanded our women’s apparel selection to include brands known for studio and yoga workouts that I think translate into running/any sweat activity (or even just casual wear!). We are having success with Beyond Yoga, Alo Yoga (men/women), Terez, Vimmia, Noli Yoga and PrismSport.”

Biggest Challenges: “Getting more people aware of our great selection and into our store. We don’t sell online. Also, having a differentiated selection is important to us.” ■

Naperville Running Company / Naperville, IL

Marisa Hird, Manager & Buyer

What Consumers Want: “A customer’s workout is done when they take a shower — not necessarily at the end of their workout. Customers want functional apparel that fits well, breathes well, and looks good. Price is important. Higher end apparel performs better, washes better and lasts longer. A customer isn’t afraid to buy an expensive pair of shorts from a brand they know and love. We aren’t afraid to give smaller companies or emerging brands a shot like Janji, RunBK and On.”

Best Selling Brands: “Just about everything we carry is made to perform! We carry New Balance, Nike, Brooks, Under Armour, On, North Face, RunBK (men’s only), Asics, Smartwool, Feetures, Balega and our own NRC branded apparel. We are just about to bring in Lululemon. We carry athleisure pieces from Nike and New Balance. Our best-selling pieces are the “basics” like a great fitting pair of high-waisted black capris with two side pockets that you can wear anywhere or a trusty men’s two-in-one short with a compression liner and breathable outer short with zipper pockets. We take risks on fun pieces (like a cowl neck sweater or casual joggers) — those tend to do well too!”

Importance of Higher-End/Cross-Functional Apparel: “We find that when the majority of our customers are looking for shoes, they’ll shop around to pick up a pair of shorts, a sports bra, or a fun new tank. Look good, feel good! Getting new gear is always great motivation.”

Biggest Challenges: “A huge challenge we face are ‘competitors’ like Target or other big box stores. It could be tough for a customer to invest in a great pair of shoes and spend just as much money on a sports bra and a few pairs of socks at the same time. We are also fighting online retailers that sell at discounted prices.” ■



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Reebok Classic's Piping Pack Club C footwear is part of the brand's Respect The Icons platform that commemorates and updates heritage styles.



ASICS has fitness and fashion covered with the Strong In Motion Strappy Seamless Bra and Seamless Legging.

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Kari Traa's Maske LS top is a merino wool baselayer that aims to "redefine athleisure" with its mix of performance properties and stylish flair.

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Brooks Running Company's Melts Collection of performance running footwear, including the limited edition Ghost 12, pays tribute to runners' favorite post-run treats during the summer: ice cream and popsicles.

Carve Designs' Sydney Sunshirt features the brand's UPF 50+ Fly Weight fabric, offering worry-free sun protection with a lightweight, post-consumer recycled material that dries quickly.



Vuori's Fleet Pant is a performance stretch knit made from recycled nylon that is ultra lightweight and breathable. So comfortable that Vuori has nicknamed the pants "silk pajamas." The fabric is made in Italy and is comprised of a very fine recycled yarn. It is knit densely, which gives it a clean, matte appearance.



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Runderwear's Women's Boy Shorts and Running Support Bra are designed to be comfortable next-to-skin and chafe-free. The Boy Shorts can be worn underneath leggings or shorts or on their own.



prAna's Quartzite Crop Top & Pillar Printed Legging in Blue Sangria are both made with a recycled polyester stretch blend. The moisture-wicking garments are designed for movement and are bluesign approved.

Columbia Sportswear's new SH/FT Collection of footwear is inspired by today's rapid urbanization and the growing movement to seek balance outdoors.



Adidas Outdoor's Fall 2019 style for the street or the trail: the wind-resistant Agravic Tight, moisture-wicking Tracerocker 1/2 Zip jacket and Terrex Two Parley trail runners, featuring a foot-hugging knit upper made with yarn spun from plastic that's reclaimed before it reaches the ocean.



Nagnata's Merino wool women's activewear range is performance-focused and sustainably made. Inspiration is drawn from traditional men's wool suiting fabrications creating a houndstooth knit jacquard pattern, combined with the brand's signature color-blocking and retro-sport details.



P.E Nation and The Woolmark Company collaborated on this premium Merino wool activewear collection featuring 100 percent natural, renewable and biodegradable Merino wool.