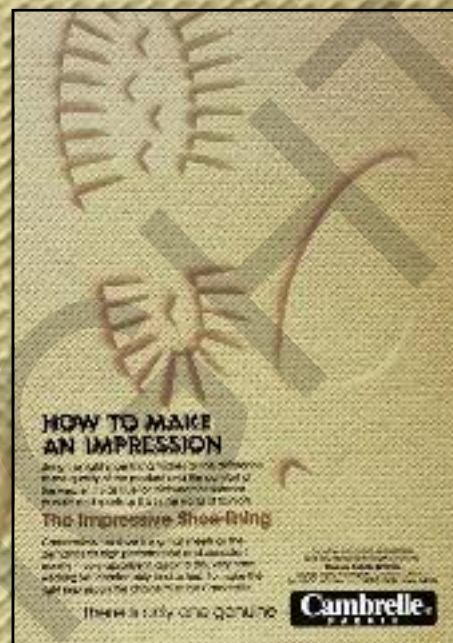


Cambrelle has a unique patented pique embossed surface. CREDIT: CAMBRELLE



Protecting your name

We live in an age totally dominated by brands. Walk down the street in any town or city in the world and you will see people wearing clothes and shoes where the brand is clearly visible as either a name or an easily recognised logo. You have to be a brand to get anywhere today.

That is fine for a completely finished product, but how do you go about promoting just one component part of it? Furthermore, to whom should you promote your branded component or ingredient, manufacturers who might use it or consumers who might buy their product if the component was perceived as being a positive selling feature or, both? This is a tough one and has only been seriously pursued in the footwear industry during the past forty years or so and a variety of strategies have been tried depending

on the type of component involved.

First and foremost, the branding of any component needs certain fundamental properties in order to be effective. It should preferably be unique or identifiably different and it needs to have verifiable quality and performance. It also usually needs protection against cheaper imitations. Different components call for different approaches, particularly regarding whether or not they are actually visible in the finished shoe, so let us take a look at how some leading producers have tackled the problem in regard to their brands.

SOLES

Vibram is probably one of the best known brands in the footwear industry for both manufacturers and consumers. It started to produce vulcanised rubber soles for climbing

boots over 70 years ago and now supplies soles for a wide range of sporting and outdoor activities. The outer surface of a sole is totally visible and Vibram has always moulded a yellow octagon logo into the waist of every unit produced. Over the years this has become associated with a technical, quality and high performance sole that can be used with confidence. Despite this, today's global market requires every effort to be made to reinforce the message to ever more potential consumers. Vibram therefore invests extensively in communication, advertising and sponsoring of precisely targeted events whose values are aligned with its own.

To continue to offer the right products in a dynamic market, it is necessary to fully understand how they are used and to keep in continuous contact with the users themselves.

Vibram makes every effort to attend events where its users gather in order to meet and talk to them. It also sponsors a number of international sporting and outdoor events across the world. The Vibram Natural Games, for example, is a major outdoor event featuring downhill mountain biking, freestyle kayaking, climbing and bouldering, acrobatic paragliding and slacklining, an extreme form of tightrope walking mixed with hiphop dancing and skateboarding. Here, top athletes are encouraged to share their experience and know-how with both proficient enthusiasts and complete beginners. And, as sponsor, the Vibram brand gains by association.

The fact that the yellow octagon on the sole of a boot or shoe is also seen to enhance their overall quality has also resulted in something less helpful; counterfeiting. This has been a problem for years, particularly in countries with scant regard for intellectual property. Fortunately, things appear to be changing. Following intense investigations in

China, thousands of counterfeit Vibram soles were confiscated in 2010. More recently, a major sole unit producer in Shaoxing City was raided by the Chinese police and thousands more fake soles were seized. This was a major success for Vibram as the moulds used to produce them were confiscated at the same time.

It was made possible due to the cooperation of the Chinese authorities who are now making every effort to stop the sale of counterfeit branded products via the internet. Adriano Zuccala, CEO of Vibram stresses that, "The fight against counterfeiting has always been a strategic goal at Vibram. The presence of these fake products on the market would not only have resulted in illegal sales but, even more importantly, would have damaged the confident relations between the company and its customers who, for over 70 years, have counted on the quality of our rubber soles designed for the most demanding use." So, having successfully created a major component brand, you must also implement a strategy to protect it.

LININGS

Someone else who has extensive experience in promoting and maintaining a component brand is Kieran O'Hare, CEO of Camtex, the manufacturer of Cambrelle linings. He explains, "Back in the 1970s, the concept of component branding was quite novel as shoes were bought very much based on the reputation of the shoemaker. The idea of featuring the quality of the components to enhance the quality of the shoe nevertheless suited the times. There were large-scale developments going on in the sports footwear sector and the promotion of brands was growing. The timing of the launch of Cambrelle was in fact perfect."

At that time, shoe manufacturers were beginning to focus on cushioning, comfort (frequently equated with dryness) and good wearing properties. Camtex is based in the picturesque Lake District in the north of England. The area is a favourite destination for walkers and hikers from around the world and they came to appreciate the moisture transport qualities of Cambrelle and would check that their boots were

lined with it.

The fibre used to produce the lining was specific to Cambrelle, being a true bi-component fibre, with a core and outer sheath. The outer and inner fibres had different melt points so that the bonding nip left the inner unaffected, which in turn created the cushioning effect. The structure also allowed moisture to be wicked away from the foot and the lining could absorb 300% of its own dry weight before any dampness or discomfort was felt. Although linings are to some extent hidden, Cambrelle was made easy to recognise by having a unique patented, pique emboss pattern.

Here was a clever product that could be used in almost any type of footwear. There were even big names in the US that lined their men's office-wear styles with Cambrelle and had athletes run marathons in them to prove its effectiveness. In terms of component branding, it was also advantageous that the US Patent Office gave the lining its protection, as well as the fact that it carried the seal of approval of the American Podiatric Medical Association.

The lining was also actively promoted at point of sale and the Cambrelle hangtag is still very much part of the branding. Footwear retailers around the world were also encouraged to be involved, with explanatory leaflets in numerous languages being produced for staff training in order to bring the quality message home to the end consumer. It is clear therefore that it is essential to make your product easily recognisable and to continue to hammer home its features and benefits to consumers even after 40 years of existence.

Cambrelle has become probably the most internationally recognised shoe lining and there has certainly been no shortage of people trying to copy it.

"There are always companies that will try to claim their linings are similar or as good as the real thing" says Kieran O'Hare, "but the fakes fail because they are not as robust or consistent in quality as genuine Cambrelle. It makes our brand even stronger when manufacturers realise that using the genuine article is easier than dealing with non-performance complaints." Nevertheless, this does not prevent Camtex from pursuing counterfeiters as aggressively as does Vibram.

The distinctive yellow octagon logo is moulded into the waist of every Vibram sole CREDIT: VIBRAM



INSOLES

Another famous footwear component brand is Texon and, once again, it was created by a new concept: cellulose insole board. Up until Texon was developed in the late 1940s, insoles had either been of leather or coagulated leather board. Texon offered the comfort of leather, a better appearance than leather board, came in sheets or rolls for easy cutting and could be used in virtually any footwear construction. It was a runaway success but once again maintaining the momentum over the years has taken time and effort.

Phil Bouldin, Regional Sales Director at Texon International, says: "The basic strategy of ingredient branding as far as we are concerned is to demonstrate that our material brings added value both to the brand customer and to the finished shoe that is over and above the basic function of the component."

First and foremost is the Texon brand itself. The company also introduced the first anti-static insole, needle-punched non-woven insole and the first cellulose insole using 100% recycled fibre. Phil Bouldin goes on to say: "The name Texon has become synonymous with innovation, quality and performance and has set the standard for structural footwear components. Customers specifying Texon can be assured of receiving consistent quality and performance wherever their shoes are made."

Then there is the documented evidence of how the component concerned affects the fit, wear and performance of the finished shoe. Texon products are manufactured to meet or exceed specifications recommended by leading testing organisations such as SATRA and to offer measurable benefits over alternatives. In addition, trained technicians in major markets advise on manufacturing problems, teach 'best practices' and recommend the right products, so providing a vital link between the brand and the factories.

No brand can afford to neglect its 'green' credentials and Texon strives to conserve water and energy, reduce CO₂ emissions and comply with global RSL (Restricted Substance List) regulations. It also uses environmentally friendly manufacturing practices that meet all local, regional and national laws and use recycled raw materials as well as customer waste.

Consumers are made aware of this on footwear featuring Texon NVIRO 70 insoling by swing tags emphasising the advanced and sustainable nature of its manufacture. Marketing campaigns such as 'Underneath the skin of shoes' and 'It's what's inside that counts' draw consumers' attention to how Texon materials enhance the performance of the shoes they are buying.

While Texon regards influencing both users and consumers as important, Phil Bouldin says that as the advertising spend required to reach the latter in

any meaningful way is prohibitively expensive, direct sales and advertising are targeted on brand and retail developers and designers. If they are convinced of Texon's added value, they are likely to include its features and benefits in finished product training and, thus it ultimately reaches consumers. It seems there is more than one way of reaching the user.

Protection is more of a problem as you cannot really emboss a logo on an insole. Texon does however employ a discrete proprietary marking system to identify its materials by mutual agreement with the brand customer. This is done to ensure that the latter is getting the material it has specified and to help identify counterfeit materials.

MEMBRANES

Waterproof and breathable membrane technology is now used in many boots and shoes, especially for outdoor and sporting applications. It poses even more promotional problems than insoles as, besides being concealed, a product's particular benefits compared to competitors can be difficult to communicate to consumers. Again it is obviously an advantage to have something markedly different and to which attention can be drawn. OutDry has and exploits this in every way possible in its marketing and promotion.

Membranes are generally used in the form of a sealed 'bag' located



Swing tags emphasise the advanced and sustainable manufacture of Texon NVIRO 70.



OutDry promotional tools show how it differs from other membrane systems.

between the upper and lining. While water can penetrate the upper, it cannot penetrate the membrane, so the lining remains dry. Humidity from the inside the lining can however still be transferred to the outside of the shoe. This is a concept that many find hard to follow but is simply explained by the difference in size between a raindrop and moisture in the form of vapour.

OutDry is laminated to the inside of the upper before the lining is sewn in. Whereas water can collect between the upper and the bag on conventional membranes, it cannot with the OutDry system. Matteo Morlacchi, General Manager of OutDry Technologies says: "This has proved to be easier to explain and we have created specific educational tools where the technology is actually visible including an upper before lasting compared to one with the 'bag' type construction. This has proved extremely effective both at trade shows and point of sale in explaining the features and advantages."

Because OutDry is unlike other membrane systems, the company has from the very start dedicated considerable time and resources to the deployment of a defense strategy to avoid the risk of competitors taking a similar product to market. This has focused on filing industrial patents and trademark registration. There are currently over 100 national applications for patents related to OutDry technologies, protecting devices, processes and semi-manufactured and finished products. Where it has obtained patents the company also makes sure they are rigorously enforced.

HIGH-TECH SOLUTIONS

A truly unique product is ion-mask produced by P2i in the UK. Based on nano-technology, it is radically different from any other water resisting system in that it is a protective coating covering the whole shoe rather than an integral part of the construction. This is proving highly attractive to brand manufacturers as it means that provided certain criteria are followed in regard to seam design, a shoe can be made in the normal manner. It is then simply a matter of applying the coating to the finished product in a special cabinet. All the extra work involved with membranes is avoided.

The fact that ion-mask is such an advanced concept is also appealing to consumers in a high-tech age. In addition, it has a key advantage over membranes as far as the wearer is concerned as its hydrophobic properties ensure less water is retained in the upper material so that there is no weight increase due to saturation. It similarly resists penetration by dirt which helps guard against stains so that shoes look newer for longer. The fact that it is solvent-free and uses only microscopic quantities of protective monomer, resulting in minimal waste and environmental impact, means it also ticks the green box.

Not only is the product high-tech but the company's methods of promoting it to the public are too. All brands using ion-mask either mark their shoes accordingly or apply swing tags so that consumers are made fully aware of how advanced the footwear is. To back this up, P2i makes extensive use of websites, downloads and videos either by itself or in conjunction with brand customers to tell the ion-mask story. Social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, are actively employed to reach out to potential consumers and to discuss the product with followers and brands.

Here we have five very different branded components or ingredients but, in many ways they share certain similarities. They began life as a result of technological breakthroughs and were firsts in their field. This gave them a major advantage over those who came later as they set the standard. The downside is that ever since, they have had to fight to stay ahead by keeping both manufacturing and customers on side. This requires considerable investment in advertising, communications and promotion. They have also had to defend themselves against hungry and sometimes unscrupulous competition involving theft of intellectual property.

It is also clear that, as in so many other fields, it is the brand itself that has become the essential driving force. The creation of a distinctive logo or other means of identification and establishing it and maintaining it in customers' minds is therefore important. If the brand remains strong, so will the product. How you convey this to customers and consumers is however up to you as it will vary from component to component and your own business philosophy.

It has been said that in today's market it is highly unlikely that anyone could make the same impact now with a footwear component as the long-established brands we have looked at here. While that is probably broadly true, there will always be exceptions—the ion-mask system may be one but only time will tell. 🌀