

The Business of Fiber to Apparel at Reebok
Lauren O'Brien and Amy Ferullo
March 22, 2017

Summary by Stephanie Noel

The process of converting fibers into apparel requires continuous innovation from creative industry professionals. Amy Ferullo and Lauren O'Brien, both graduates of the TMD department at the University of Rhode Island, have made this business their career. Both women hold positions at Reebok in material innovation and product testing. Reebok, an active wear company, was purchased by Adidas in 2006 and has since experienced an image makeover. Using taglines such as "Be More Human" and "The Gym is Everywhere," Reebok has geared its new marketing strategy toward tough, committed, well-rounded athletes. This demographic requires high performance, quality athletic wear at a reasonable price. Ferullo and O'Brien are among those challenged with the task of creating innovative concepts to meet these expectations.

The first step in this process is concept and product generation. Developers are asked to identify a problem to solve and determine if this concept will be revolutionary enough to "move the needle." They are then asked to create a story that will drive the product forward, pitching these ideas to brand leaders for approval. After receiving the green light, the second step of material innovation input commences. Market research is conducted, trade shows are attended and input from both suppliers and consumers is sought. The information gathered allows staff to move on to fabric development. Here is where fabric specifics are discussed. Factors include cost, supply chain logistics and business strategy, and the company must determine if the product is still a good idea. A small sample of the material will be produced, and the sample will undergo testing and validation. Mandatory tests will determine if the fabric complies with industry standards, and specialized testing will show if the fabric is suitable for the desired end use. If these tests go well, the fabric is passed and moves into garment creation. A design pack will be created in partnership with the developer, and production will be allocated to a garment factory.

At this point the product is handed off to the product testing and performance engineering team. They test the finished product, creating and executing real life wear tests. From a selection of applicants, five volunteers are chosen to receive a demo product and use it for a period of time. After this the samples are returned to the company along with feedback from the testers. The feedback is analyzed against test criteria developed by the engineers, and the product is either approved or rejected. The sample product also undergoes performance testing in a human engineering lab to test its endurance and biomechanics. If the product fails to meet certain guidelines or receives numerous poor reviews it will be rejected, although adaptations may be made in an attempt to improve the product. If the samples tested well and receive positive reviews, the product will be approved and the process of mass production for sales will begin.

Ferullo and O'Brien shared insight into their careers in the world of fiber to apparel development. While many take the clothes on their backs for granted, these women proved that there is much more to the shirt on your back than you may think. The business of fiber to apparel offers numerous career opportunities to those seeking employment in the textile field. Ranging from creative positions to those based more in science, this career path is an open door for graduates with a variety of specialties and interests. As Ferullo pointed out, many TMD graduates would never dream of having a job title of "engineer." She is proof that if one widens their perspective they may find a fulfilling career path they never expected.