

A Call for Wovens

Service industries are hiring again, so now's the time to meet their needs.

BY DAVID J. BEBON



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I recently took my 11-year-old daughter to our local phone store, I was told, to just “look” at the new cell phones. While we were browsing and examining the many new models, I couldn't help but notice that all the staff members were wearing the same French blue end-on-end branded woven sport shirt. I guess being in this business makes us more aware of what clothing people wear; we have all probably been guilty of asking to look at some poor soul's main label at the neighborhood dinner party, or asking the question, “What's that shirt you're wearing?” at the Sunday soccer game.

My cell phone shopping experience isn't unique (at least in the case of the shirts). As our economy begins to slowly rebound, businesses will contemplate adding employees to their payrolls. As a result, the first visible sign of this turnaround will be apparent in the service industries that we all patronize.

Think about what industries apply: car dealerships, travel agencies, restaurants, bars, hardware stores, etc. The list is endless. Many of the local businesses in our towns that service a customer base often adhere to some type of uniform apparel, which will more often than not be a woven shirt.

It hasn't been this way for the past two years. The woven sport shirt market in both the promotional and retail channels has weathered a tough stretch. Price compression in all categories has been especially harsh in apparel,

So why wovens now? First of all, many believe the casual Friday phenomenon that pervaded the business world in the '80s and '90s has begun to dissipate and make way for a more serious, dressed-up look. The transformation, if it occurs, has certainly influenced the uniform concept in our service industries, quietly pushing employee apparel programs toward woven sport shirts.

Secondly, while denims, twills and oxfords historically reigned in the woven market, we have seen a true explosion of product offerings in woven shirts with performance properties – wrinkle-free, moisture-management, stain- and soil-repelling treatments and antimicrobial. That is something that a lot of industries will want.

Take, for example, the fast-food industry, which will always depend on low-cost knit polos and T-shirts made of poly/cotton blends – the easy-care properties make sense for most hourly employees, and the tees substantiate the high employee turnover rate. Management, however, should graduate to a woven, such as oxford or poplin, to differentiate their positions and responsibilities.

The food service and hospitality industries have gravitated toward another woven trend – camp shirts. We have witnessed incredible growth in camp shirt assortments in all service-industry employee uniform programs. With both solid and patterned fabrics, camp shirts offer a casual look that is readily accepted in restaurants, bars, resorts and even the trade show circuit. Plus, most camp shirts in our market are fashioned from rayon/polyester blended fabrics, and this also lends itself nicely to home laundering and general appearance.

I have just cited two examples where wovens make all the sense in the world. Those industries certainly value the look of wovens, and they value their performance, as well. Over 80% of all Americans launder their shirts at home, so wrinkle-free shirts save them hassle and time. Stain-release (fabric finishes that allow most stains to be “released” through home laundering) and stain-repellent (liquids and other elements can't penetrate the fabric face) are also appealing properties. The two together are a potent combination for today's service-industry employee uniforms.

Quite simply, the opportunities to sell wovens to service industries will continue to grow over the next few years. It's an opportunity that will benefit all of us. ■

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leaving the lion's share of business to T-shirts and basic three-button knit golf polos.

I was recently asked, as a member of the *Wearables* Advisory Board, if T-shirts will always be the number-one wearable in our industry. My answer was an unequivocal “yes.” T-shirts are and always will be tops.

Yet that being said, woven sport shirts offer a huge opportunity to sell up and move our customer base into higher priced, less casual apparel. The button-down oxford shirt, for example, will always be perceived as a little dressier than the average knit golf polo.