Care Labeling and Consumers

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Today's consumer wants apparel that is easy to care for, comfortable, and priced affordably to fit their budget and lifestyle. These apparel preferences have challenges for fiber producers, fabric mills, apparel manufacturers, retailers, and fabric care specialists.

Today's Consumer—Educated and Demanding

Today's consumer is educated and demanding. The consumer has two thoughts: "save me energy" and "save me stress." Save me energy translates into the following apparel preferences:

- Make it simple to buy apparel
- Make it simple to care for apparel
- Make it simple to understand and to wear apparel

Save me stress means:

- Reduce problems
- Guarantee fair prices
- Offer a simple return policy

Today's consumer also has attitudes about "casual workplace apparel" and new apparel products. The casual workplace (also known as dressing down) has been in the U.S. corporate environment since 1979. In the past 3 years, there has been an increase in wearing casual wear to work. This increase has been evident by: the growing number of companies that have instituted casual day, and the increased number of casual days for companies.

In 1996, casual apparel for the workplace translates as "casual and comfortable" apparel. Recent research examining the casual workplace with U.S. Fortune 500 companies has found that the casual workplace has not peaked. There has been a rapid acceleration of Fortune 500 companies adopting this practice within the last 2 years (1994-96) and the number of companies instituting the casual workplace continues to increase. Casual apparel has become part of the corporate culture. Research has found that casual apparel improves workplace morale and is a no cost benefit to companies. No wonder over two-thirds of all U.S. companies have established some form of casual dress for the workplace.

New apparel products are the life of the textile and apparel industry. Today's consumer is searching for new, exciting and different apparel products. However, one remembers the distressing apparel retail environment in 1995 and 1996, when consumers opted to purchase hard goods, such as computers, instead of soft goods, such as apparel products. Lack of product innovation, purchasing computers instead of apparel, and consumers viewing apparel product sameness, has caused consumers to push the limits on life expectancy of apparel (a real challenge for fabric care specialists).

Consumer attitudes about shopping are interesting. In 1996, traditional shopping is less leisure driven and more of a chore. The retail marketplace presents pricing games. Time and energy constraints, lack of convenience (consumer may be less brand and less store loyal), and less interest in shopping are three reasons why some consumers are shopping less than 1 hour a week.

Consumer Attitudes About Care Labels

Many educated consumers are label conscious. For these consumers, care is an important criterion. Care labels become increasing important with the in-store wrinkle resistant merchandising that emerged in the early 1990's. In addition, consumers still look at brand labels, fiber content, and now closely examine country of origin labels since child labor issues have come to light.

However, consumers are not educated about the difference between dry cleaning and laundry services. Specifically, consumers are not educated about the difference between wet cleaning and home laundry. Consumers distrust low labeling; "Dry Clean Only" may mean other (successful) methods. Many consumers do not read care labels while others do not take care labels seriously. Manufacturers and retailers are making guarantees about the finished apparel product and consumers have guarantee expectations (not always consistent with manufacturer and retailer expectations).

Distrust with labeling is but one part of a larger issue—honesty with all packaging is an issue. In addition to distrust (with care requirements, country of origin, and fiber content), some labeling information is not understood by the consumer. For example, the U.S. consumer still does not understand "microfiber" and "denier," even though these products have been in the U.S. marketplace for several years.

Consumer Perspectives: Wet Cleaning and Dry Cleaning

If the consumer interpretation of "Apparel that is easy to care for, comfortable, priced affordably to fit budget and lifestyle" is not enough of a challenge, the fabric care industry has wet cleaning and dry cleaning challenges.

Wet Cleaning Perspectives

Research conducted at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has found interesting results related to wet cleaning perspectives. Consumers do not differentiate products that should be wet cleaned versus home laundered. In addition, the consumer has not been educated that the fabric care specialist wet cleans. Opportunities exist for consumers to utilize wet cleaning services since many consumers: (1) want professional appearance (including casual wear apparel), (2) are concerned with the environment (but may *not* practice environmental actions), and (3) realize the cost (in time and appearance) of home laundry. For fabric care specialists, wet cleaning services may be targeted to consumers by exploiting these opportunities.

It is important to know that consumers can use (but are not using) high temperatures in home laundering of many apparel products. Results of using lower temperatures (such as soil retention, unsuccessful stain removal, and product appearance in jeopardy) result in dissatisfaction with the apparel product.

Dry Cleaning Perspectives

Research results also indicated that most consumers think all products are dry cleaned by the fabric care specialist. In addition, consumers question environmental issues, view the dry cleaning process as costly, attempt to launder "Dry Clean Only" items, and use the dry cleaner to correct stain and appearance problems.

Challenges and Opportunities

Get/Remain Involved in the Integrated Partnerships:Correct Care Label Myths with Industry and Consumer

This conference is a proactive step in addressing consumer challenges—and identifying opportunities for the fiber, textile, apparel, retail, and fabric care industries. The entire product chain (which includes the fabric care industry) is concerned with consumer apparel product satisfaction. Continual information exchange, and problem solving should occur with the following groups:

- Fabric care specialists
- Fiber producers
- Chemists and colorists
- Testing - Standards
- Textile mills
- Manufacturers (apparel, home furnishings)
- Converters
- Retailers
- Importers/Exporters

- Government

Topics of primary importance should include:

- Care labeling.
- Product/service trends.
- Fabric care industry's expertise and service at the product development stage.

This conference should be a starting point for future industry-wide task force(s) with quality assurance personnel. Panels and/or seminars at industry-wide conferences in addition to committees (such as American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists committees) are excellent problem identification and problem solving forums. Product/service planning and purchases directly impact **everyone's** bottom line.

Talk To Your Consumers

Communicating with consumers is imperative in today's competitive environment. Fabric care specialists must get consumers to plants for wet cleaning *and* dry cleaning. Verbal and written communication should include the following 4 C's:

- Communicate why wet cleaning is better for casual apparel than home laundry
- Clarify at home laundry v. wet cleaning
- Control: Quality assurance of appearance
- Convenience

Consumers are aggressive and demanding when dissatisfied. Listen to consumers—they will appreciate your listening. Consumers offer good ideas and solutions, especially in test marketing new ideas. This communication will help reaffirm your marketing strategies. Benefits can include: store, brand, fiber, country loyalty, and a cost effective strategy to maintain your customer base.

Re-Evaluate Your Technology Approach

Technology is changing rapidly and it is imperative to re-evaluate your technology approach. An updated customer data base provides opportunities with product and service sales history, consumer products preferences, and data sharing with other product channel members.

Use Consumer and Product Information Provided

One final challenge: provide not simply knowledge, but education. This will illustrate your understanding of consumers' apparel needs and your interest in keeping the consumer satisfied with apparel products and services.

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APPAREL CARE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

ALTERNATIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND LABELING

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CARE LABELING AND CONSUMERS

"Apparel that is easy to care for, comfortable, priced affordably to fit budget and lifestyle"

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- Today's Consumer — Educated and Demanding
- Consumer Attitudes about Care Labels
- Consumer Perspectives: Wet Cleaning and Dry Cleaning
- Challenges and Opportunities

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I. TODAY'S CONSUMER — EDUCATED AND DEMANDING

A) Who are today's consumers?

1) Consumers Have Two Thoughts:

"Save Me Energy"

- Make it simple to buy apparel
- Make it simple to care for apparel
- Make it simple to understand and to wear apparel

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"Save Me Stress"

- Reduce problems
- Guarantee fair prices
- Offer a simple return policy

(Adapted from Yankelovich Partners)

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Consumer Attitudes about Apparel:

Casual Workplace ("Dressing Down")

CASUAL WEAR on increase ... for now

- Casual dress at work
- 1995: "The Stuff That's Important to Me"

CASUAL AND COMFORTABLE

(Yankelovich Monitor)

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Casual Workplace ("Dressing Down")

- Fashion Cycle: Where is casual workplace?
  - Casual workplace has not peaked
  - Rapid acceleration of U.S. Fortune 500 companies adopting within last two years (1994-96)
  - Has become part of "corporate culture"
  - Improves workplace morale
  - No cost benefit to companies
- 2/3 U.S. Companies have established some form of casual dress

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"New" Apparel

- Consumer is searching for new, exciting and different apparel products
- Pushing "limits" on life expectancy of apparel

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Attitudes about Shopping:

Traditional shopping is less leisure driven/more of a chore

- Pricing games
- Time/energy constraints (less time)
- Convenience issues (may be less loyalty)
- Absence of fun/experience (less interest)
- Overall "pain" to consumer (shopping less than 1hr/wk)

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II. CONSUMER ATTITUDES ABOUT CARE LABELS

- ***Educated*** consumers who are "label conscious"
  - Care is important criterion
  - Care labels (especially with in-store "wrinkle resistant" merchandising)
  - Brand labels
  - Country of origin labels
  - Fiber content

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- ***Not*** educated about the difference between dry cleaning and laundry services
- ***Not*** educated about the difference between wet cleaning and home laundry

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- Distrust with "low labeling"
  - Many consumers do not read care
  - Consumers do not take care labels seriously
  - "Dry clean only" may mean other (successful) methods
  - Manufacturers / retailers making "guarantees" about finished product

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- Distrust with labeling
  - Honesty with all packaging is an issue
  - Care requirements, country of origin, fiber content
  - Some labeling information not understood (microfiber, denier)

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III. CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES: WET CLEANING AND DRY CLEANING

"Apparel that is easy to care for, comfortable, priced affordably to fit budget and lifestyle"

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Wet Cleaning Perspectives

- Can use (but not using) high temperatures, resulting in:
  - Soil retention
  - Unsuccessful stain removal
  - Appearance in jeopardy
  - Dissatisfaction with product and service
- Want professional appearance with "casual wear" apparel
- Concerned with environment (may not practice)

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- Has not been educated that fabric care specialist "wet cleans"
- Does not differentiate products that should be wet cleaned vs. home laundry
- Wet cleaning not at cost of dry cleaning
  - At cost (time, appearance) of home laundry

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Dry Cleaning Perspectives

- Think all products are dry cleaned
- Questions environmental issues
- Views process as costly
- Attempts to wet clean "Dry clean only" items
- Uses dry cleaner to correct problems (stain, appearance)

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IV. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Get/Remain Involved in the Integrated Partnerships:

Correct Care Label Myths with Industry and Consumer

With

- Fabric care specialists
- Fiber producers
- Chemists and colorist
- Testing - Standards
- Manufacturers (apparel, home furnishings)
- Converters
- Retailers
- Importers/Exporters
- Government

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About

- Care labeling
- Product/service trends
- Fabric care industry's expertise and service

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How

- Task force(s) with Quality Assurance personnel
- Panels, seminars at conferences
- Industry-wide conferences/committees

Why

- Their product/service planning ***and*** purchases directly impact ***your*** bottom line.

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Talk To Your Consumers

Must get consumers to dry cleaning plant for wet cleaning and dry cleaning

- ***Communicate*** why wet cleaning is "better" for casual apparel
- ***Clarify*** "at home" laundry vs. wet cleaning
- ***Control:*** Quality assurance of appearance
- ***Convenience***

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Consumers are aggressive and demanding when dissatisfied

Listen to consumers

- They will appreciate your "listening"
- Consumers offer good ideas and solutions
- Test market new ideas
- Reaffirm your strategies
- Benefit—store, brand, fiber, country loyalty
- Benefit—cost effective strategy to maintain customer base

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Re-Evaluate Your "Technology" Approach

- Opportunities with product / service sales history, preferences
- Data "power" with retailers and manufacturers

Use Consumer and Product Information Provided

- Provide not simply knowledge, but education