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Rising Standards: The Appeal of Enduring Apparel

By COTTON INCORPORATED



Cotton Incorporated

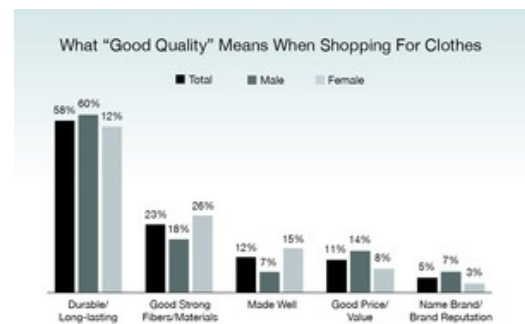
Photo By Lifestyle Monitor™ Survey

A few years ago when jobs and incomes took a hit, consumers became obsessed with getting the lowest price possible when shopping for clothes. But then "frugal fatigue" set in, and consumers started to look beyond the discounts to truly evaluate what it was they were buying. Now it seems the old school mindset of purchasing durable apparel that lasts is back in vogue.

At Rapunzel's Closet, which has two Florida shops and an online store, people are "definitely" looking for craftsmanship in their apparel, says Hallie Rosenthal, buyer and operations manager.

"If durable apparel equals quality apparel, I think it's very important to people right now," Rosenthal says. "For us, selling quality clothes makes people come back and that's because reliability is key. If a store sells something that falls apart immediately, consumers forget about going back. But they remember the store that sold them the jeans they love and have lasted forever."

When shopping for clothes, 58% of consumers define "good quality" as "durable/long-lasting" followed by "made of good strong fibers/fabrics/materials" (23%) and "made well" (12%), according to the Cotton Incorporated



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Photo By Lifestyle Monitor™ Survey

*Lifestyle Monitor Survey*TM. And 91% of consumers rate quality as important to their apparel purchasing decision, just behind fit (96%), comfort (94%) and price (92%).

Walter Baker, CEO and creative director of Walter, says that after living through the Great Recession and watching their wallets, the modern shopper appreciates clothes that last.

"They don't want to buy something to just throw it away," he says. "A lot of stores offer clothes you wear twice and they fall apart. I try to make clothes that wear well no matter the price. If you buy it, you want to say, 'Wow, this looks great, and it's lasting all this time.'"

In its recently released 2011 U.S. apparel market report, the NPD Group says apparel sales increased 4% to \$199 billion, evidence that consumers are getting out of the race to the bottom.

NPD says manufacturer-owned stores posted the highest growth rate, up 15%, while off-price and specialty stores were both up 6%. Department and national chain stores grew 3%, while mass merchants improved 1%.

"These channel results demonstrate that the consumer's pursuit of value has become more about 'brand names for less,' and less about getting the 'lowest prices,'" says Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst, The NPD Group, Inc. "Some stores and brands have shifted with the consumer. They provide an assortment of recognizable brands, a good deal, and better quality merchandise as well as having shifted away from being only about the lowest price. These are the ones that have posted growth."

In order to keep prices low, some stores and brands began swapping out better fabrics for lower priced fibers – but consumers noticed. Among shoppers who bought clothes in the past six months, 41% believe the quality has decreased compared to last year, according to the *Monitor*. More than half (54%) say apparel does not last as long as it used to. Even more troubling, more than half say they are "bothered" that makers would substitute synthetic fibers for cotton in their jeans and T-shirts (58%).

Monitor data reveal that substituting synthetics does not sit well with consumers, given that 62% say cotton apparel tends to be higher in quality than synthetic, and most are willing to pay a premium to keep cotton from being substituted in their favorite garments like jeans (63%) and T-shirts (58%)."

Rosenthal says Rapunzel's Closet vendors take pride in the fabrics that they select for their products.

"They spend a lot of time giving us information on what it's made of," she says. "They also take the time to tell us about how it is constructed –and classic silhouettes play a factor in that 'durability.'"

Rosenthal says the store emphasizes building relationships with clients. "And a big part of that comes from carrying the type of product people want to come back for. You can't just be a pretty face, smiling and selling T-shirts. The T-shirt has to sell itself, too."

The Walter collection is sold at a number of better stores including Bloomingdale's, Saks and Macy's. Macy's Terry Lundgren, CEO, has said there is untapped potential in "making the best products. Not the cheapest products, but the best, highest quality products—and there's more opportunity for us to zero in on these opportunities."

Regardless of the type of store, more than half of consumers have high quality expectations for clothing offered at department stores (84%), chain stores (80%), specialty stores (79%), off-price stores (57%), and mass merchants (50%).

Baker, whose collection includes cotton knits, among other fabrics, says his collection acknowledges that women are still watching their spending.

"My idea is, offer the best possible product at the best price so the consumer is happy—and then she doesn't mind spending her money."

This article is one in a series that appears weekly on WWD.com. The data contained are based on findings from the Cotton Incorporated Lifestyle Monitor™ Survey, a consumer attitudinal study, as well as upon other of the company's industrial indicators, including its Retail Monitor and Supply Chain Insights analyses. Additional relevant information can be found at CottonLifestyleMonitor.com.

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