

Opportunities will come in the safety wear market for providers of reflective technology. But for now, sports represents a more immediate market, and much more fun.

Glow-in-the-dark fabric takes its sporting chance

It's all the rage to use fluorescent fabric to add a splash of class to sports clothing, as the big brands have begun to do. In the case of adidas, it even used the technology to enhance the appeal of referees' shirts at the 2006 Fifa World Cup in Germany, with its Mercury tops showing strips of fabric in "sunshine yellow" at the collar, on the sides and, naturally, on the adidas logo on the right-hand breast pocket.

The brand was pleased with the popularity of these shirts in the refereeing community worldwide and the colour touches have continued in subsequent models of officials' kit.

But adidas is far from the only brand to have found a new way of bringing a nice, warm glow to its products, and Daniel Leipnik, a brand manager at Australian fabric supplier The Specialty Group, feels he has found a way of making the glow go further. The product he is now promoting on the world market is a special glow-in-the-dark material called Energlo and, according to Mr Leipnik, it has already caught the eye of designers right across the sports and outdoor arena.

His company was founded as long ago as 1978 and began life as a supplier of a waterproof, breathable material—called Emphatex—to some of the major brands on the market. Eight years ago one of the organisations that was using Emphatex, a police force on home territory for the company in Australia, approached The Specialty Group and said that the weatherproof material was working well, but that they would like to have something that lit up as well.

The result is Energlo, which the brand manager describes as a "photoluminescent-coating" that, after only ten minutes' exposure to indoor or (preferably, because it's full-spectrum) natural light will glow in the dark for three hours. "Its intrinsic chemical structure means that this material will glow," Mr Leipnik explains. "It's patent-pending globally, and applying the




Just ten minutes' exposure to indoor or outdoor light is enough to make Energlo glow for three hours.

 Energlo

coating that provides the glow-in-the-dark functionality does nothing to compromise its waterproof and breathable qualities. It has synthesised, man-made technology in it that makes it photoluminescent. And the coating is a permanent finish—it won't come off."

The Energlo product is a complement to, rather than a substitute for, reflective material, he insists, but that does not mean the safety clothing market is of no interest—it certainly is, but he sees that space as one his company will move into in the course of the next decade. For now, sport is the thing.

"I've been in the sports market," Mr Leipnik says, referring to his days of building up brands'



Reflective material is now commonplace in the sports apparel market. Light-reflecting bicycles will come onto the scene soon.



Vaudé is a big fan of using reflective elements in its cycling apparel.

 Vaudé

enthusiasm for Emphatex, "and I know what people there are looking for. If the designer likes something, it's in there next season."

The speed with which this can happen appeals to him. In the safety clothing market, where customers are often public sector organisations spending public money, with all the controls and procurement procedures that entails, he feels it could take three, four, even five years for Energlo to make an impact. "Sport is the here-and-now," he continues, "and it's also a lot of fun. It's very gratifying to visit an event such as ispo and see what designers can do with an idea like ours. We're proud of it. It's an Australian product and I get a great sense of pride from launching something of interest to major brands in the US and Europe."

It will be seen on Salomon backpacks in spring 2009 and on the collection The North Face will launch for winter 2009-2010. Daniel Leipnik says those companies may also move to include the material in their sportswear collections next year, but it's the backpack business that he has confirmed.

At Vaudé and Quiksilver, the design teams have already incorporated the product into some fascinating apparel designs, using the effect of photoluminescence to enhance the metallic tones they have chosen to use. Mr Leipnik also envisages strips of the material going into clothing for cycling and running, and also into children's winter collections. Another brand he

mentions is Spyder, which is already using the fabric both in children's and adults' collections.

"There is a fashion angle to this," he confirms, which would help explain why the referees' tops referred to previously have been selling so well (if you're going to have to put up with 90 minutes of abuse from a football crowd you might as well look good). "But the fashion thing will peak soon. It will continue to be huge for the next two years.

After that, safety and workwear will take over in volume for us, and we're ready for that. For example, the product is flame-retardant so fire-fighters and other first-responders can, and will, use it."

For now, though, the fun continues. ☺



A Spyder jacket with the glow-in-the-dark fabric built in.

 Energlo/Spyder