



Gore-Tex maker decides it's time to demand attention



By Eric Ruth, The (Wilmington, Del.) News Journal

For years, W.L. Gore & Associates has made a worldwide name for itself by speaking with a quiet voice, content to stand in the shadows while its partners making apparel with its fabrics took the main marketing stage.

These days, Gore's no longer acting so shy.

The Elkton, Md.-based company that makes Gore-Tex performance fabrics has launched a global, multimillion-dollar advertising effort to elevate its image. It has enlisted a menagerie of wild-animal models to show how outdoor apparel made with its fabrics helps users adapt, survive and excel.

In one print ad, a prowling fox — its coat naturally suited for harsh weather — visually morphs into a crouching man who's being wrapped by strands of Gore waterproof fabric.

In other ads, human shapes meld seamlessly and strikingly into other creatures, such as a butterfly, a bear and a shark.

Steve Shuster, global brand manager at Gore, would not specify how much Gore is spending on the advertising campaign, other than to say it is the costliest such effort in company history.

The multiyear campaign now being introduced in Europe and America aims to put the Gore identity prominently onto retailers' floors along with the apparel brands for the first time.

Through the use of four new "product classes" for its fabrics — each designed for a different level of enthusiast — the rebranding effort also tries to give those retailers a new method of steering customers toward the right products.

The overall aim is to create a brand identity that stands out unmistakably from the competition in performance fabrics.

Traditionally, "standing out" is not necessarily something that has concerned this proudly unorthodox firm. The familiarity of its name in the outdoor apparel market has come despite Gore's preference for playing a support role in the products of other brands.

It's an approach that has worked, leading many consumers to prefer products with "Gore inside," even if they weren't entirely certain what it was or how it worked.

"They're buying it not necessarily because they're planning to climb Mount Everest, but because it represents something that's difficult to quantify" — and desirable to be part of — says John Shanley, an industry analyst at Susquehanna International Group in Bala Cynwyd, Pa.

The ad campaign hopes to build on and reinforce those consumer preferences, using slick graphics and the images of adaptation in nature to portray Gore as a company that offers "creative solutions."

Ultimately, Gore hopes, the scope of customers who demand goods with their products — "brand insistence," as Shuster calls it — will reach farther around the planet.

"We believe the campaign has enormous leverage on a global basis," Shuster says.

Such a goal is an ambitious — and tricky — task for any company, even one as innovative as Gore, says Tom DeSanto, executive vice president of the Wilmington, Del., advertising, marketing and public relations firm Aloysius Butler & Clark.

"That's a difficult thing to do, because different cultures value different attributes," DeSanto says. Successful global branding identifies the places where those cultural attributes intersect, he says.

The campaign also is coming at a time of increasingly energetic maneuvering by outdoor-apparel manufacturers, analyst Shanley says.

"There is a concerted effort being launched by a number of different companies ... to differentiate their products in the marketplace," he says.

Retailers in particular are looking for branding advantages that make a product stand out in the fairly static niche of outdoor apparel, says Shanley.

That's where the animals come in, Gore's Shuster says. The beasts used in the Gore ads are the kinds of images that have the potential to make people stop and stare — especially when they seem to morph into a human form.

"We want to stop and engage them, make this emotional connection, and have them do something," such as visit the company website for more information, Shuster says.