

THE GOODS AT A GLANCE

By Michael Sudmeier

To better understand what the future has in store for the industry, we abandoned crystal balls to focus on a comprehensive, data-driven analysis. We interviewed over 140 brands and dozens of retailers, sifted through 600 pages of responses, examined thousands of product images, and poured over stacks of spreadsheets to identify emerging trends. Thanks to our notes, you can skip the required reading and still attain an A in market research.

Cheat Sheet

Boards

The NeverEnding Camber Story: Camber stories still dominate discussions on the sales floor. Hybrid cambers are gaining momentum, while cambered boards are making a slight comeback.

Emphasizing Interactions: Brands are placing a greater emphasis on how symmetry, shapes, camber stories, and core profiles interact to influence board performance.

Technology with Reduced Impacts: Manufacturers are reducing environmental impacts by replacing fiberglass with basalt, crafting topsheets with castor beans or digital print technology, and using flip-flop bases.

Bindings

Maximizing Boardfeel and Flex: To maximize board feel and minimize disruptions to flex, manufacturers are using slimmer baseplates and mounting discs that are smaller and capable of hinging.

Slimming Down: Brands continue to trim weight through lighter hardware, simplified highbacks, and new strap technology.

New Brands, New Bindings: Several brands make their debut with interchangeable parts, optional highbacks, designs inspired by skate trucks, and step-in technology.

Boots

Skate-like Designs: Riders are increasingly seeking boots that offer enhanced board feel through softer foams and low-profile soles.

Out of the Box Fit: Due in part to the use of softer foams, out of the box fit is more important than ever. Customers want instant gratification on the sales floor.

Zonal Lacing: Zonal lacing systems are offering improved fit and performance by isolating sections of the foot—in particular the forefoot, ankle, and calf. These systems often rely on a blend of closure technologies.

Premium Products: Premium boots are gaining ground on the sales floor. These boots include features like waterproof and breathable membranes, specialized soles, and discipline-specific designs.

Goggles

Oversized, Frameless Lenses: To maximize peripheral vision, goggles are going big and forgoing frames.

The Latest Lens Technology: Brands are introducing new lens technologies, including new materials for minimizing fogging and lens tints that change in response to shifting light conditions.

Interchangeable Lenses: With minimal hassle, riders can exchange lenses to adapt to changing light conditions. Think of it as quick release technology for eyewear.

Helmets

Four Seasons Friendly: Thanks to venting innovations and removable earflaps and liners, companies are offering helmets that can handle numerous sports and all seasons.

Systems Thinking: Goggles and helmets influence each other's fit and performance. Expect an increased focus on helmets and goggles designed and merchandised through these interactions.

Multi-impact Designs: Helmets designed to handle multiple, smaller impacts are gaining sales. Due to the absence of certification standards, however, these helmets are likely to remain a smaller segment of the market.

Travel Bags

Designed for Durability: Whether through hardshell technology or the use of beefy materials like tarpaulin, brands are crafting bags that can handle years of abuse.

Double Duty: Backpacks are being designed with an eye for both the airport and the backcountry. Don't be surprised to find a toiletry pouch alongside board straps.

HITTING THE RESET BUTTON

RECORD SALES, LEAN INVENTORIES, AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES EXPLODE POSSIBILITIES

By Michael Sudmeier

Thirty years ago, riders terrorized golf courses with wooden planks, bungee cords, and Sorels covered in duct tape, equipment that showcased snowboarding's premier technology. While the technology behind today's kits comes from sources that could double as ingredients in a science fiction novel—chemistry labs, volcanic rocks, hemp farms, recycled bottles, and the aerospace industry—they remain in the service of making riders smile whether they're lapping the bunny hill or throwing down double corks.

Yet technology is not the only thing making brands and retailers smile. Last year brought record snowfall and sales, as well as the end of—or at least a respite from—an era of overproduction. According to SIA, snowboard hardgoods sales totaled \$303 million during the 2010/11 season. Compared to the preceding season, sales climbed four percent in dollars while declining four percent in units, securing healthier margins for retailers. With less surplus inventory flooding the market, last year's average retail price for a board increased nine percent compared to the previous season. Despite a backdrop of economic uncertainty across the globe, brands and retailers are cautiously optimistic about the future. And thanks to lessons learned from the past and the lean inventories of the present, they are working to create a healthier tomorrow.

TRANSFORMATIVE TECHNOLOGY

For several years, brands and retailers found themselves catering to customers interested in little more than low prices. Now, however, they are encountering consumers that are more discerning. Armed with information, riders do not necessarily equate low prices with value. As Stepchild's marketing and design director, Sami Shams explains, "Customers are realizing it's more cost effective to buy a great deck for 400 dollars that will last for two to three seasons [than] cheap boards that break within three weeks." Salomon Sales Manager Rob McCutcheon echoes, "Consumers are demanding what we all expected them to: value."

As consumers continue to research their options and retailers work to differentiate products on the sales floor, they are rewarding innovation. "We will be watching all products in all categories that are technically set apart," explains Jon Eason, owner of Blindside in Colorado Springs. "We are seeing quite a few first-time products to the market and now, more than ever, the items with a legitimate story are selling themselves."

"Everyone is trying new things," states CAPiTA Product Development and US Marketing Manager Sean Tedore. "Whether it is tip shape or camber design, the look and feel of the typical snowboard has definitely changed over the last few years." Nonetheless, camber profiles continue to dominate conversations about board technology. During the 2010/11 season, sales of reverse camber boards gained dominance over cambered boards for the first time ever.

In fact, 63% of the season's models featured reverse or mixed cambers. Hybrid cambers, which blend rocker and camber technology, continue to gain momentum, and companies are placing a greater emphasis on communicating how board shapes and symmetry, camber stories, and core profiles interact to influence the way a board rides. Nitro Director of Operations Josh Roberts explains, "We see core profiling becoming the buzz term, since it has a direct impact on the board's flex and response characteristics."

Brands are also injecting decks with new materials and construction techniques. Flow, for example, will debut its Augmented Base Technology (ABT), which places a layer of silicone between a board's core and base to provide a smoother ride. According to Eric Luthardt, product manager for boards, "The base between the feet can move two millimeters up or down with light pressure, so it truly adapts to anything without washing out." For its part, Ride is fusing its carbon fiber Pop Rods to the urethane sidewalls of its boards to enhance pop, stability, and durability.

When it comes to bindings, brands are unveiling both refinements and patent-worthy inventions. Manufacturers are working to maximize board feel and minimize disruptions to board flex. This has led to slimmer baseplates and mounting discs that are smaller and hinge. As this technology evolves, brands are expanding it throughout their collections, and Forum and Rome are expanding their use of canting systems.

For both speed entry and traditional bindings, brands are working to improve performance and comfort while shedding weight. Burton's

While technology is increasingly being infused in the board building process, there's no substitute for hand-crafted quality in many steps, including grinding one of Arbor's new boards at the Elan factory in Austria. PHOTO: COLVIN



new buckle system, Smackdown, allows riders to get in and out of toe straps without ratchets. Flow's Modular Highbacks feature customizable support panels made of urethane. In efforts to shed weight, Flux will rely on new molds and has removed traditional forward lean adjusters.

Several newcomers also aim to reinvent the binding. Inspired by skateboard trucks, NOW forgoes traditional baseplates and uses customizable bushings of varying densities to maximize energy transfer and shock absorption. Switchback offers a binding system built around interchangeable components, and both NOW and Switchback can be ridden with or without highbacks. Bon Hiver's Freebase system allows riders to strap into traditional bindings that lock into a fixed baseplate, providing step-in-esque convenience and the ability to skate into features like rails.

Advances in materials, sole technology, and lacing systems are redefining what riders expect from boots. "Out of the box fit has become the most important trend by far," states DC Director of Snowboard Hardgoods Michael Fox. "Whoever dials in fit wins on the boot wall." Nike Product Line Manager and Developer Steve Pelletier notes that, "Riders are moving towards softer flexing boots that offer more board feel than in the past." To achieve this, manufacturers are turning to softer liner foams and lower profile soles.

"Skate style boots that are easy to lace up seem to be the hot ticket," offers Salomon Marketing Manager Kevin Stevenson, "but people are also looking for something new, technical, and innovative." Deeluxe's Spark and Spark XV serve as examples of the innovation consumers are seeking. These boots cater to splitboarders and backcountry riders by offering waterproof and breathable membranes and a crampon-compatible Vibram sole.

Boots are also relying on new construction techniques. Alex Zhao, Flow Product Manager for Boots, notes that "a lot of brands are moving towards no-sew or minimal stitching on boots" to reduce construction and material costs. New construction techniques are also fusing boot liners with shells, such as Burton's Phantom Construction.

ART GALLERIES TO GO

"Snowboards are such an incredible canvas for artwork, so debuting the new board graphics each season feels a little like having a gallery opening," explains Burton Chief Creative Officer Greg Dacyshyn. Although content will always be diverse, brands are increasingly turning to photo-based graphics, construction approaches that provide a glimpse of board materials (such as wooden topsheets), and artistic collaborations. Burton is collaborating with Rhino Records and the Grateful Dead, Capita is teaming up with Volcom, and Arbor continues to draw on its collective of artists. Next year's crop of bindings feature unprecedented finishes, ranging from metals with rainbow washes to plastic finishes modeled after concrete and rust. Most boots, however, feature subdued colorways informed by classic footwear and outdoor gear.

ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES

Whether crafting boards, bindings, or boots; brands are working to continue reducing their environmental impact. Fiberglass, carbon fiber, and toxic resins are increasingly being replaced with basalt, hemp, and nontoxic resins. Wood cores with finger jointing and flip-flop bases are helping minimize waste. Manufacturers are also working to source materials close to factories and reduce consumption. Spark, for example, has reduced its use of aluminum by thirty percent over the past few years.

Celsius continues to use hemp in its Climate boot line and Nike will rely heavily on PET made from recycled bottles, which allows the brand to craft boots using content that is 60 to 70% recycled. Vans Product Line Manager Eddie Lee notes that "Our entire boot line is PVC free and every style is made with water based cements in lieu of petroleum-based glues." Brands are also quick to emphasize that the best ways to reduce their impact include eliminating overproduction and building products that last.

PRODUCTION CHALLENGES

One of the greatest trends shaping the industry is the rising cost of doing business abroad. Rome Director of Sales Dan Sullivan states, "With labor costs rising consistently in China, and expected to continue rising, sourcing is an area that demands more focus than ever." In addition to labor, the price of raw materials and fuel continues to rise, causing brands to anticipate production costs increasing five to 10%. As brands face challenges abroad, domestic manufacturers—such as Smokin, Never Summer, Epix, Rhythm, Mervin, Unity,

Humanity, Venture, Signal, Spark, and Karakoram—are gaining ground. Never Summer Snow Sales Manager Mike "Gags" Gagliardi notes that with increasing labor costs abroad, "Having set up a factory overseas is definitely more of a burden for some people."

THE NEW CALENDAR

Challenges overseas have also served as a catalyst for reshaping production and sales cycles. According to Ride US Sales Manager Shawn Penrod, brands are "continually moving order dates and the production cycle forward as lead times continue to increase." Many companies are booking orders and forecasting sales a month earlier than previous years. To help ensure products ship on time, companies are also streamlining their collections.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

In an effort to better serve and capitalize on emerging segments of the market, brands and retailers have increasingly directed their efforts toward women, children, freeriders, and splitboarders. According to Roxy Hardgoods Product Manager Kyre Malkemes, an increased focus on females benefits the entire industry. She explains, "Studies have shown that if the female in a household participates in a sport, the whole family is more likely to participate." The past few years have also brought a skyrocketing demand for backcountry and splitboarding products. Companies that cater to these market segments—such as Venture and Spark—anticipate this rapid growth will continue for several years before reaching equilibrium.

RETAIL RELATIONS

After being burned by overproduction, competition online, and direct sales, specialty retailers are benefiting from healthier relationships with the brands. Favorable terms, dating, free freight, ongoing support from sales reps, and category discounts serve as evidence of this. Brands are also aiding retailers with limited edition collaborations and regulating the availability of certain products. Burton, for example, will no longer offer its Restricted line through its website, instead directing all sales to specialty shops. Companies that limit distribution within geographic areas, such as Never Summer, continue to gain loyalty among retailers and grow demand for their products. By directing online sales to core retailers through Shopatron, brands are expanding online distribution without compromising their brick and mortar allies. Companies are also using social media to support retailers. "Our Facebook page has become a place of commerce," explains Jones Director of Sales Chad Perrin. "As people post seeking our products, we find a retailer that stocks what they are looking for and post that information."

Brands are also courting consumers with their stories. Perrin offers, "Consumers are starting to look harder into brand and product stories that they can relate to and really connect with."

Smokin's transparent approach to disclosing the royalties it pays for pro models, for example, has enabled riders to better understand the values and vision behind the brand. Signal has gained a loyal following with its Every Third Thursday show. According to Brand Director Dave

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Lee, Signal's efforts to build boards once a month using unusual materials are starting to "open riders' eyes to manufacturing and what it takes to build a board."

OVERHAULING THE INDUSTRY

Due to the strength of last season's sales and lean inventories, brands and retailers are better equipped to shape the future of the industry. And they realize that with this opportunity comes responsibility. As Ride's Penrod notes, ensuring that the market has the right amount of product is "not any one person's responsibility...we all need to work together to ensure that." To further the efficacy of this collective action, Cal Surf Owner Scott Oreschnick hopes "companies realize what a strong marketing tool the core retailers are for their brands." If they do, the season may be defined not by closeouts and shuttered shops, but scarcity driven by sales.