Guidance on design for longevity – occasionwear

Extending the lifespan and use of garments is one of the most significant ways of reducing the environmental impact of clothing.

Product overview

- Occasionwear refers to clothes that are worn for special events and occasions. It includes bridal wear, dinner jackets, evening wear, party dresses and high-quality suits.

- Occasionwear garments often command a premium price – which may mean that consumers expect them to be of higher quality and to last longer.

- Occasionwear is worn infrequently, but garments are often retained unworn in wardrobes for long periods, sometimes being kept for sentimental value.

- Many occasionwear items require specialist care in terms of hanging and cleaning.

- There may be unrealised opportunities for hiring or leasing garments of this type due to their infrequent use.

Top five solutions

- Using classic styles, innovatively, to help transcend fashion fads.

- Ensuring high quality fabrics are used when designing garments.

- Designing garments that are multi-functional, to give the customer the option to wear different parts of the outfit with other clothes.

- Facilitating alteration through adjustable waistbands, generous seams or additional buttons.

- Selecting materials and components that can withstand the chemicals used in the dry-cleaning process.

Extending the average life of clothes (2.2 years) by just three months of active use per item would lead to a 5-10% reduction in each of the carbon, water and waste footprints, and cut resource costs by £2bn.
What limits lifetime?

There are essentially two key, yet contrasting, reasons that limit lifetime of occasionwear: the fact that it is worn infrequently, which has various consequences listed below, and the fact that it involves delicate materials which can be easily damaged.

- During the long gaps between wears, the owner’s body size or shape may change, so garments no longer fit.
- Infrequently worn occasionwear becomes dated or unfashionable in appearance over time.
- Sometimes, people discard items simply because they have not worn them for so long.
- Occasionwear is often made from delicate fabrics and so can be snagged, torn or subject to pile loss. This can happen during wear – with spillage also a risk – in storage or due to inappropriate dry cleaning or laundering.
- Repairing damaged occasionwear is often either deemed uneconomical or is not technically feasible.

Around 30% of clothing waste ends up in landfill.

The waste footprint for clothing is estimated at 1.2 million tonnes, equivalent to 5% of UK household waste.
Recommendations on fibre and fabrics

Occasionwear affords the opportunity for detailed make-up, the use of luxurious fabrics, surface decoration and embellishment, and opulent trims.

- The fabric range used in occasionwear is extensive, with choice of fibre and fabrics often driven by appearance and handle.
- To minimise the risk of damage to these delicate fabrics, designers can select higher quality weaves (e.g. for satin to reduce snagging) or stipulate quality (e.g. of velvet to reduce pilling).
- Finishing such as embroidering, trims such as sequins, and motifs are associated with occasionwear. As much care needs to be given to sourcing these elements as the main fabrics, as damage to finishes and components can lead to garments being thrown away or returned to store.
- Pilot testing of fully made garments – including all finishes and linings – can provide an insight into robustness.
- Fabric-specific care advice is particularly important for consumers.
- Before applying anti-soil finishes, it’s worth checking with fabric suppliers what the impact might be on the fabric.
Recommendations on design and manufacture

Design can help increase longevity in two fundamental ways – by focusing on quality so garments last for longer, and by enabling consumers to wear items more frequently and so get more use out of them before discard

- Because there are often long gaps between wears, people’s body size or weight may fluctuate. This can be addressed through design for ease of alteration (e.g. including adjustable waistbands, generous seams or additional buttons) and by focusing on flattering fits.

- Classic styles and colours help transcend fashion fads and mean an item is more likely to be re-worn when fashions change.

- Trend colours can be introduced as highlights for embellishments, buttons and styling.

- Garments can be designed to be worn in more than one way – or have detachable parts so that the design can be simplified or worn on less formal occasions. Possibilities include co-ordinating separates or layering.

- Garments can be sold with accessories that help transform their look – such as costume jewellery, scarves or belts that change an outfit from formal wear to day wear.
**Recommendations on care and repair**

Occasionwear is not subject to the stresses and strains of products worn day-to-day and garments tend to be less frequently cleaned, but extra care is needed to maintain the look and fit because of their delicate nature. Therefore accurate, detailed and specific care advice is particularly important.

- Where garments need dry cleaning, it is worth reminding consumers that this should be done only when necessary – using airing instead as a means of freshening garments.
- Consumers may need reminding to wash or dry-clean co-ordinating products (e.g. both parts of a suit) together, and to remove accessories.
- Consumers may need to be warned to avoid rubbing stains, as this can damage the fabric, and not to use solvents for spot cleaning as they can cause discolouration.
- For fabrics that are susceptible to pulls – such as woven Jacquard and satin – additional advice may be needed both around wear and storage.
- In general, appropriate storage for occasionwear is important: it may be necessary to recommend the use of wooden or padded hangers and any loops provided on garments to maintain shape.
- To facilitate simple home repairs, spare buttons and matching thread can be provided as applicable.
- As specialist skills and machinery may be required for repairs and alterations, there is an opportunity to develop specialist aftercare services or identify companies to recommend to customers.
Recommendations on re-use and discard

Re-use is preferable to discarding when items are in a reasonable condition. Product development teams can facilitate re-use by considering it at the design stage.

- Garments designed in classic styles and colours are more likely to be re-used, particularly where the design allows for modification.
- Vintage fashion offers a route to resale.
- Recent evidence has found a strong consumer interest in opportunities to hire occasionwear or formal wear, and in a ‘buy back and resale’ model, in which customers could return nearly new occasionwear to retailers for resale, receiving monetary rewards or store vouchers. Both routes offer consumers an opportunity to afford occasionwear they may not otherwise purchase.
- Other channels for re-use include online resale, charity shops and swap or swishing events. Retailers can provide advice on these on their own websites.
- Fabrics used in occasionwear can often be repurposed even when the item is no longer wearable. Consumer education may be needed to encourage them to give items up for recycling, rather than simply throwing them away.
- Garment design can affect the ease with which clothes are recycled. Using a single fabric facilitates recycling, but where multiple fabrics and components are used, there is scope for designers to make it easy to disassemble these, without compromising the robustness of the product.
This is one of a series of Guidance Notes for product development teams offering guidance on design for longevity.

For further information visit:

www.wrap.org.uk/clothing