

Q&A Philip Hamilton, Director of Product, The North Face

Outdoor gear manufacturer The North Face is speeding up its innovation and design processes by assembling a new lab and deploying fresh strategies. Patrick Hamilton, the company's Director of Product, fills us in.



By [Reena Jana](#) | November 16, 2011 -- 20:18 GMT (12:18 PST) | Topic: [Innovation](#)

http://i.bnet.com/blogs/philip-hamilton_1.jpg) Popular athletic-gear company [The North Face](http://www.thenorthface.com) (<http://www.thenorthface.com>) has declared November "Snow Safety Month" (<http://www.neverstopexploring.com/blog/2011/11/the-north-face-names-november-snow-safety-month.html>)," and appropriately broke with its typical product-launch cycle by previewing new snow-related items for Fall 2012 in New York on November 15.



Yes, the items--a super-compressible, stay-dry down alternative; a backpack equipped with an airbag to protect wearers in an avalanche; and a jacket that features a proprietary material infused with a micro-particle that regulates body temperature--are all impressive. But perhaps the newsiest aspect of The North Face's decision to preview these products now--about two months earlier than usual for the debut of an autumn line--is that the company is in the midst of very consciously speeding up its innovation process.

Philip Hamilton, Director of Product at The North Face, stepped away from product demonstrations at Manhattan's Chelsea Piers to talk to me about how his team is interested in helping not only athletes, but also the company, push themselves to perform faster and stronger.

Here's our edited conversation.

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SmartPlanet: The North Face seems to be pushing itself to get products that feature new safety or comfort technologies out sooner. Why...and how?

We're in the process of setting up a new, internal innovation center to purely focus on bringing breakthrough ideas forward and into the market faster. Based on our experience, it can take 2-5 years to develop a new product. What we're going to do is really separate the innovation process and use that lab so that we're not shackled by seasonal product timelines. Or even budgets or other restrictions.

We're currently staffing it. We're looking at a significant number of employees working at the center, and it should open by 2014 or 2015. This is part of our move to our new corporate headquarters, which will be in Alameda, California.

Today, we partner a lot with universities such as the University of California, Davis, on biomechanical research, and other organizations such as the Mayo Clinic, on physiological research. We will still partner in this way, but we want to drive the innovations we want to go after, the breakthrough ideas.

SP: Can you describe the North Face's innovation process? I know that you work directly with athletes to find material and design solutions to challenges they face. But how does that really happen?

We don't do this for every single product. Sometimes we're coming up with new products not with "pure" innovation, but we also influence our older products with new learnings. We usually, though, start with athletes--snowboarders, ultra-runners--and take them on expeditions. We work together to solve true problems they encounter, whether they're climatological or about impact control. Basically, we look at real-world extreme demands. This allows us to gather deep insight. We don't think it can be mined in any other way. We also work to anticipate needs. These strategies are aligned with our product development and design process.

SP: How do you balance very different feedback from scientists, athletes, and even everyday consumers--as The North Face is obviously a popular "lifestyle" brand--into your product-development process?

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We definitely look at great feedback from anywhere, although athletes are our core audience. However, last year, we went on an expedition onto a mountain with ultra-runner Diane van Deren and researchers from the Mayo Clinic. It is fascinating to see the symbiosis between scientists and athletes, and to see how they each approach challenges such as inhibiting climates.

We listen to consumers as well. I'm a big believer in testing the hell out of products. We do so in our in-house labs. We do so with third-party labs. But consumer feedback is what elevates a product. When a consumer has a new experience that is noticeable and different, it marks a true innovation as great.

When you look at North Face sales, 40-45% are consumers that don't have a specific activity in mind, or it's a non-athletic activity, one that we hadn't designed a product for. They tell us a coat is great for walking in the rain to the bus stop. The performance of our technologies designed for and with athletes can also benefit people buying North Face products for lifestyle reasons.

SP: Tell me about the three technologies and products you're showcasing early this fall. How do they represent new directions for The North Face or for outdoor sports gear in general?

Using an ABS airbag system for avalanche safety in a pack, that itself is nothing new. There's been a lot of research into how airbags slow down people when they are getting dragged down underneath snow in an avalanche and how survival rates shoot up when airbag backpacks are used. But we are also working on a vest, currently being tested and which doesn't yet have a release date, and which we aim to be an industry first.



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The Fall 2012 ThermoBall jacket, with patent-pending baffling

We have a patent pending for baffling we're using in a jacket with our new ThermoBall synthetic down alternative. We've found that ThermoBall currently outperforms the warmth-to-weight ratio of the top synthetic insulations by 15 percent.

FlashDry regulates body temperature because of a micro-porous particle we and our vendor added to a printable layer on some laminated textiles. What makes it unique is that we're using it in numerous garments used as head-to-toe layers, from knits to synthetic insulation to waterproof, breathable clothing. In our industry, our competitors haven't yet been able to use a single high-performance tech that's appropriate for all garment layers.

But there's more happening at The North Face. For example, what I can say is that we're also looking at NASA, and talking and thinking about things we can do with NASA technologies.

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Image: The North Face

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