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# Quality Indicators Used by Retail Buyers in the Purchase of Women's Sportswear

Jean C. Rogers  
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## *Abstract*

*This study used a mail questionnaire to investigate the quality indicators used by buyers to purchase women's sportswear. Spearman's Rho and ANOVA were used for analysis. Garment construction and brand name were identified as the best indicators of overall garment quality, but construction, price, and brand name were the most important cues used in purchase decisions. Educational background in basic textiles had little effect on buyers' prioritization of quality cues. Buyers who had more advanced study in textile testing and evaluation ranked fabric characteristics, garment construction, and price as important cues. Use of brand name and place of origin cues were both positively related to buyers' years of experience, while style and wholesaler's information were negatively correlated. Type of store had little effect on buyers' prioritization of quality cues. Style, seconds or irregulars, fabric flaws, dye imperfections, and price negatively affected buyers' purchasing decisions.*

Fashion merchandising programs are organized to prepare students for positions in the textile/apparel industry. Apparel buyer is one of the professional roles to which many students aspire. Although the job responsibilities for the position of retail buyer are diverse, they all focus on one goal: to provide the goods which the ultimate customer wants. Once viewed as a relatively simple task requiring minimal training, changes in marketing structure, consumer demands, and available products have all contributed to the need for trained professionals in retail buying (Packard, Winters, & Axelrod, 1983; Wingate & Friedlander, 1978).

Many fashion merchandising programs attempt to educate potential apparel buyers, but the vast majority do not provide sufficient training in garment evaluation. Other buyers receive no formal education, and experience serves as their major guideline for apparel purchasing expertise. Consequently, buyers frequently rely on proven brand names as the primary indicator of garment quality. Reliance on past performance of brands may no longer fulfill the changing needs and preferences of the consumer, in light of the changes in garment production.

An important goal in purchasing for retail sales is to maintain customer loyalty through a consistent satisfactory level of quality. It is important for buyers to identify quality

indicators consistent with those used by retail clientele and then use them in the examination and evaluation of garments for retail sale.

Retail buyers must be able to discriminate between the levels of quality of garments in order to obtain the best value possible for their customers. A study by retail buyers Claxton and Ritchie (1979) cited poor product performance resulting from poor quality of materials and workmanship as a major source of customer dissatisfaction. A visual evaluation of apparel items by buyers prior to purchase should help to reduce this source of dissatisfaction to the customer, but visual analysis does not reveal the level of all attributes important to product performance. Some garment characteristics can be evaluated only by physical evaluation in the laboratory or through wear testing.

An additional concern for retailers is to limit losses due to consumer returns of merchandise. An examination of garments by retail buyers for acceptable levels of quality prior to purchase for retail sale should also help to reduce customer returns of apparel because of disappointing garment quality. Visual examination will reveal obvious fabric and construction flaws; however, it will not address garment characteristics which require laboratory equipment or wearing and cleaning for identification.

Before retail buyers can address these issues, they must first be knowledgeable about factors which denote high quality in garment construction. Although garment evaluation has not been stressed by fashion merchandising programs in the past, massive changes in the apparel industry make this a vital concern today. Increases in technology, offshore con-

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struction, imports, and construction by jobbers are a few of the changes in the apparel industry which create the need for a closer look at quality standards. For these reasons research into evaluation of garment quality is both timely and necessary.

Quality level is a difficult factor to isolate and define when examining clothing items for purchase. While the term *quality* generally denotes high quality, lower levels of quality will often satisfy specific clientele, depending on expectations and performance needs of a garment. The level of quality in a garment is a composite of several different factors.

Fabric selection influences the quality level of the finished product. Manufacturers' methods of garment construction influence the end-use expectations of a garment. Seams and seam finishes, buttonhole construction, use of interfacing, and matching of seams will influence customer acceptance of apparel. The compatibility of the component parts is another aspect of garment quality to which attention should be given during inspection of the garment by the experienced professional. Some aspects of compatibility may be assessed during visual evaluation. Others await consumer use for identification.

The garment's end use influences the level of quality anticipated by the consumer, and the importance of garment performance is likely to depend on the type of garment (Knoll & Shiloh, 1976; McCullough & Morris, 1980). For some, product quality may be equated with durability; for others, it may suggest a fit with a certain lifestyle (Riesz, 1978).

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to survey retail buyers of women's sportswear to examine factors associated with purchasing decisions. The study endeavored to

1. Identify the quality cues which retail buyers perceive to be the best indicators of garment quality;
2. Determine the priority that retail buyers give to quality indicators;
3. Examine a possible relationship between a buyer's educational background in textiles and priority given to quality indicators;
4. Determine whether there is a relationship between a retail buyer's years of experience and prioritization of quality indicators;
5. Determine whether there is a relationship between the type of store for which clothing is being purchased and priority given to quality indicators; and
6. Determine the effect of selected garment characteristics on the retail buyer's purchasing decisions.

### Background

The retail buyer's role includes stock control, display and promotion, budgeting, maintaining sales records, supervising other employees, clerking, and handling returns to manufacturers (Judelle, 1971; Packard, Winters & Axelrod, 1983). These tasks center around the most important responsibility, which is to make a profit. Knowledgeable buying of apparel can increase the margin of profit by eliminating costly buying errors and satisfying consumers.

Both intrinsic and extrinsic cues influence the judgment of the retail apparel buyer. Olson and Jacoby (1972) defined an intrinsic cue as "a product attribute which cannot be changed or experimentally manipulated without also changing the physical characteristics of the product itself" (p. 168). Intrinsic cues to product quality in apparel items would be fiber content, weave and yarn structure, garment construction methods, and fabric structure.

Intrinsic cues provide the best indication of product quality. Due to inherent association with product characteristics (Olson, 1977), evaluation and analysis of intrinsic cues are more difficult. Apparel buyers must have a working knowledge of textiles to evaluate product quality of a garment through use of intrinsic cues. Therefore, "the extent to which intrinsic cues will be used to assess quality will depend on the learned expertise of the person doing the evaluation" (Wheatley & Chui, 1979, p. 208).

Extrinsic cues are "product related attributes which are not part of the physical product" (Olson & Jacoby, 1972, p. 168). Examples of extrinsic cues in apparel are price, brand, color, and store image. Many research studies have focused upon the effect of extrinsic cues upon the perception of product quality (Andrews & Valenzi, 1971; Dardis, Spivak, & Shih, 1985; Gale & Dardis, 1970; Hatch & Roberts, 1985; Riesz, 1978). Some authors refer to these cues as psychological factors in apparel purchasing (Martin, 1971-1972).

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## Method

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### Data Collection

Each objective of the study was investigated through specific questions constructed for that purpose. Questions were examined for clarity and pertinence and compiled into a questionnaire following the format guidelines recommended in *Mail and Telephone Surveys* (Dillman, 1978). This instrument was scrutinized by three retail professionals and nine professors in relevant content areas. The instrument was rewritten to incorporate their suggestions.

Respondents to the questionnaire provided information regarding length of experience, frequency of apparel purchase, and type of store for which they purchased. Responses to 12 forced choice questions were also solicited. These questions asked buyers to

1. Identify characteristic they considered to be the best indicator of quality in women's sportswear,
2. Rank in order of importance the characteristics they use in evaluating apparel items for purchase,
3. Use a Likert Scale to indicate how important they consider each of a list of characteristics in evaluating an item of apparel, and
4. Rank in order of importance those characteristics which would cause them to reject a garment.

### Sample

The sample was selected from a master list of all the buyers who purchased apparel from a Pacific Northwest apparel mart. This list categorizes buyers according to the type

of apparel they purchase, thus providing the opportunity to compile a list of all buyers who purchased women's sportswear.

Each buyer was contacted by mail and asked to participate in the study. The letter explained the purpose of the study, to identify criteria which retail buyers use when purchasing garments for resale. They were assured of confidentiality. Following procedures recommended by Dillman (1978), a reminder postcard was mailed one week later. Three weeks later a second letter and questionnaire were mailed to each nonrespondent. These procedures resulted in the return of 137 questionnaires, a 68.5% return rate. The sample consisted of 24 men and 113 women.

## Results and Discussion

### Sample Demographics

Demographics of the participants are reported in Table 1. The retail buyers ranged in age from under 25 to over 65, with 26-35 (28.5%) and 36-45 (30.7%) being the largest groups. Years of experience as a buyer ranged from 0-5 to 36-40. The largest percentage of respondents, 36.3%, had 0-5 years of experience; the next largest group, 26.6%, had 6-10 years of experience.

Frequency of purchasing was examined for the buyers. The largest number purchased six times a year, but the range of buying activity was from once a week or more to 2-3 times a year. The buyers represented major department stores, independent department stores, large specialty stores, small specialty stores, and discount stores, with the largest group from small specialty stores (53.3%).

Education level varied from high school graduate to graduate degree. The largest percentage were college/university graduates (28.5%), while 26.3% had some college education. Other participants had business college (5.1%) or community college (8.1%) educations. Of the participants in this study, 8.1% had completed some graduate work and 2.9% had graduate degrees. Only 20.5% did not have formal educational experience beyond high school.

Thirty-six (26%) of the respondents had taken a course in clothing construction. This was the clothing and textiles course most frequently reported. Twenty-nine (21%) had taken beginning textiles, 13 (9%) advanced textiles, 31 (23%) fashion merchandising, 19 (14%) garment evaluation, and 12 (9%) textile evaluation/testing.

### Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed to determine the quality cues used by the women's sportswear buyers and to identify the relationship of demographic characteristics of respondents to their buying practices.

Table 2 identifies the quality cues which the buyers considered to be the best indicators of high quality. Physical examination of garment construction was cited by 50.8% of the

Table 1. Demographics of respondents.

Sex	No.	%	Apparel purchase	No.	%
Female	113	82.5	Weekly or more	24	17.8
Male	24	17.5	2-3 times a month	28	20.7
			Monthly	12	8.9
			6 times a year	51	37.8
			2-3 times a year	6	4.4
			Other	14	10.5
Age	No.	%	Years of buying experience	No.	%
Under 25	8	5.8	0-5	53	36.3
26-35	39	28.5	6-10	36	26.6
36-45	42	30.7	11-15	18	13.4
46-55	24	17.5	16-20	11	8.1
56-65	19	13.9	21-25	4	2.9
Over 65	5	3.6	26-30	6	4.4
			31-35	2	1.5
			36-40	3	3.6
Education	No.	%	Course in clothing & textiles	No.	%
High school	28	20.5	Clothing construction	36	26
Some college	36	26.3	Beginning textiles	29	21
Business college	7	5.1	Advanced textiles	13	9
Community college	11	8.1	Fashion merchandising	31	23
College/University	39	28.5	Garment evaluation	19	14
Graduate work	11	8.1	Textile evaluation	12	9
Graduate degree	4	2.9			
Type of store	No.	%			
Major dept.	12	8.8			
Independent dept.	18	13.1			
Large specialty	26	19.1			
Small specialty	73	53.3			
Discount	2	1.5			
Other	6	4.4			

respondents, and 30% identified brand name as being the most important indicator. The response distribution for the other quality cues was low, with little difference between cues.

Subsequent questions asked buyers to assess the priority which they give to quality indicators in making buying decisions. They were asked to rate the five quality cues they considered to be most important. The frequency of rating of the cues by the buyers is reported in Table 3, along with the average rating. Low average rating indicates that buyers place more importance on that cue in the evaluation process.

Results of rating quality cues (where "1" is the highest) indicate that buyer priorities are for style (rating score of 1.95), garment construction (2.57), brand name (2.79), and price (2.97) when assessing apparel quality. This ranking represents an inconsistency from the data displayed in Table 2, which identifies garment construction and brand name as being the most important indicators by 80% of the respondents.

Care label, wholesaler's information, and place of origin were considered least important in response to both questions. The greatest discrepancy in response is for price and style, which rate high in the priority rating process (Table 3) and much lower when the buyers identified the best indicators of high quality (Table 2). Price is one of the lower four on Table 2 and one of the higher four on Table 3.

**Table 2. Quality cues identified as the best indicator of high quality by retail buyers of women's sportswear.**

Quality cue	Frequency	Percentage
Physical examination of garment construction	66	50.8
Brand name	39	30.0
Fabric characteristics	7	5.4
Fiber content	6	4.6
Style	5	3.8
Price	2	1.5
Wholesaler's information	2	1.5
Care label information	1	.8
Place of origin	1	.8
Other	1	.8

Sample size = 137

**Table 3. Rating of quality cues by retail buyers of women's sportswear.**

Quality cues	Frequency of rating					Ave. rating
	1	2	3	4	5	
Style	55	39	17	10	4	1.95
Other*	1	2	--	--	1	2.50
Garment construction	39	20	17	22	14	2.57
Brand name	20	10	18	14	9	2.79
Price	11	39	35	19	19	2.97
Fiber characteristics	3	9	21	23	14	3.51
Fiber content	3	14	18	19	32	3.73
Care label information	1	3	6	19	19	4.08
Wholesale information	2	--	3	5	6	4.13
Place of origin	1	--	1	3	12	4.47

Note: Average ratings were computed by multiplying the top ratings by 1, second rating by 2, third by 3, fourth by 4, and fifth by 5; summing the totals for each cue; and dividing by the sample size for that cue.

- \* 1 Buyers' relationship with vendor
- 2 Color market trends
- 1 Fit

The Likert Scale was used to assess the importance which retail buyers of women's sportswear attribute to specific cues in evaluating quality. Each cue was rated on a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from *very important* (1) to *very unimportant* (5). An average rating was computed for each cue, with lower numerical ratings indicating greater importance as a quality cue. Two additional cues were added, machine and hand stitching, which are easily identifiable garment construction factors and might impact quality ratings.

Table 4 indicates that style (1.41), garment construction (1.53), price (1.86), and fiber content (2.03) were identified as being the most important cues in determining high quality garments.

**Table 4. Rating of quality cues by retail buyers of women's sportswear.**

Quality cues	Frequency of rating					Ave. rating
	*1	2	3	4	5	
Style	100	17	9	1	4	1.41
Garment construction	93	28	5	6	4	1.53
Price	70	32	18	6	7	1.86
Fiber content	54	35	29	6	5	2.03
Fabric characteristics	36	49	31	10	5	2.23
Care label information	33	33	40	15	9	2.49
Brand name	28	28	47	16	12	2.66
Machine stitching	19	31	45	20	15	2.85
Wholesaler's information	15	22	56	17	16	2.98
Hand stitching	11	26	39	23	28	3.24
Place of origin	9	13	40	26	43	3.62

\* = Very Important

Results of this investigation to determine buyers' use of quality cues in apparel purchasing indicated that they rated garment construction, style, brand name, and price as the four most important cues in evaluating garment quality. The ratings of quality cues such as brand name, price, and fiber content vary with the type of question and rating system used.

This study also investigated the relationship of buyers' formal educational background in clothing and textiles to the priority they gave to the ranking of quality cues. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze this relationship. Caution must be used when interpreting the results of ANOVA due to the small number of buyers who had taken specified clothing and textiles courses.

**Table 5. Analysis of variance to compare average rankings of cues which are significantly different in their importance for buyers who have taken specific clothing and textiles courses.**

Course taken	N	Mean square	F	p
<b>Clothing construction</b>				
Place of Origin	17	5.37	6.26	.02
<b>Beginning textiles</b>				
Other	4	8.33	25.00	.037
<b>Advanced textiles</b>				
Other	4	8.33	25.00	.037
<b>Fashion merchandising</b>				
Other	4	8.33	25.00	.037
<b>Garment evaluation</b>				
Other	4	8.33	25.00	.037

**Table 6. Analysis of variance to compare average Likert Scale rankings of cues which are significantly different in their importance for buyers who have taken specific clothing and textile courses.**

Course taken	N	Mean square	F	p
<b>Clothing construction</b>				
Price	133	4.66	3.64	.058
Wholesale information	126	4.78	3.74	.055
<b>Advanced textiles</b>				
Place of origin	131	6.75	4.58	.034
<b>Textile evaluation and testing</b>				
Fabric characteristics	130	5.55	5.13	.025
Garment construction	136	6.83	7.57	.006
Price	133	10.52	8.51	.004

Quality cues were examined in relation to both average rankings (Table 5) and Likert Scale rankings (Table 6) for buyers who have and have not taken clothing and textiles courses. These tables identify the courses and the quality cues which are significantly different in their priority to the buyers.

The courses which influenced the priority of the cues used in the buyers' evaluation process were clothing construction, advanced textiles, and textile evaluation and testing. Buyers who had a clothing construction background emphasized place of origin, price, and wholesaler's information as cues in making purchases. Those who had advanced textiles and textile testing and evaluation courses utilized place of origin, fabric characteristics, and garment construction as important quality cues.

In each case those who had the specific coursework background placed greater importance on the cue than did those who had not had the coursework. One buyer who had taken several courses cited the "other" category and identified "vendor's selling history in the area" as being very important as a quality cue in garment selection.

Buyer experience was also examined in relation to the priority given to quality cues used in the purchase of women's sportswear. Spearman's rank order correlations were used

**Table 7. Correlation between prioritization of quality cues and the number of years of experience as a buyer.**

Quality cue	N	Correlation coefficient	p
Brand name	69	-0.41043	.0005
Place of origin	17	-0.48412	0.0489
Style	123	0.21007	0.0197
Care label information	47	0.00165	NS
Fabric characteristics	70	-0.08120	NS
Fabric content	96	-0.03034	NS
Garment construction	110	-0.00947	NS
Price	121	0.11065	NS
Wholesaler's information	15	0.14580	NS
Other	4	-0.50000	NS

to determine significant relationships between rankings of quality cues and Likert Scale ratings with years of buyer experience.

In this analysis three variables show significant relationships between numbers of years of buyer experience and priority given to these quality cues. With increased years of

**Table 8. Correlation between Likert Scale rankings of quality cues and the number of years of experience as a buyer.**

Quality cue	N	Correlation coefficient	p
Brand name	129	-0.17143	0.0521
Wholesaler's information	125	-0.19364	0.0305
Fiber content	129	-0.09007	NS
Machine stitching	128	-0.06517	NS
Fabric characteristics	129	-0.05205	NS
Hand stitching	126	-0.04634	NS
Care label information	128	0.00060	NS
Style	130	0.06341	NS
Price	132	0.10553	NS
Garment construction	135	0.12509	NS
Place of origin	129	0.15679	NS

experience, brand name and place of origin take on greater importance. By contrast, style is ranked lower in priority with increased years of buyer experience (see Table 7).

When quality cues were correlated with years of experience, using the Likert Scale, brand name rated significantly higher in importance. Wholesaler's information as a quality cue decreased in importance as the number of years of experience increased (see Table 8). The effect of specific garment characteristics on the retail buyers' purchasing decisions was also investigated, using frequency counts. Buyers were given a list of garment characteristics and asked to check those which would cause them not to purchase a garment. Table 9 lists these characteristics, response fre-

**Table 9. Selected garment characteristics which result in the rejection of the garment by retail buyers of women's sportswear.**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage of respondents
Style	106	77.4
Seconds or irregulars	105	76.6
Flaws in the fabric	105	76.6
Dye imperfection	101	73.7
Price	99	72.3
Unmatched plaids	99	72.3
Unsecured stitching	97	70.8
Fiber content	75	54.7
Loose threads	68	49.6
Limited size range available	64	46.7
Limited color range available	58	42.3
Brand name	20	14.6
Place of origin	19	13.9
Other	11	8.0

quencies for each, and the percentage of respondents for which this characteristic would cause rejection.

Those characteristics most likely to result in rejection by these retail buyers of women's sportswear were style (77.4%), fabric flaws (76.6%), seconds or irregulars (76.6%), dye imperfections (73.7%), price (72.3%), and unmatched plaids (72.3%). Characteristics which do not appear to have a significant effect on the decision to reject an item were identified as brand name (14.6%) and place of origin (13.9%).

Respondents were also asked to rank the same characteristics regarding their importance to buyers' decisions not to buy. Responses to this question are found in Table 10. Ranking indicated that style (2.10), seconds or irregulars

**Table 10. Identification of negative garment characteristics by rank.**

Characteristic	Frequency of rating					Ave. rank
	1	2	3	4	5	
Style	41	21	13	8	7	2.10
Seconds or irregulars	29	15	11	13	4	2.28
Flaws in the fabric	25	16	24	14	14	2.74
Price	17	26	13	17	11	2.75
Dye imperfections	2	15	20	21	11	2.92
Fiber content	5	10	13	8	10	3.17
Limited size range	7	4	9	6	10	3.22
Limited color range	3	6	9	8	8	3.35
Other	1	-	-	2	1	3.50
Brand name	1	3	3	4	5	3.56
Unmatched plaids	2	5	8	14	11	3.68
Place of origin	-	2	2	1	4	3.78
Unsecured stitching	1	8	10	10	20	3.82
Loose threads	-	2	2	9	7	4.05

(2.28), fabric flaws (2.74), price (2.75), dye imperfections (2.92), and fiber content (3.17) were the characteristics most likely to cause rejection by buyers. Responses in Table 10 are consistent with those in Table 9 except for fiber content and limited size range, which were not in the most important group (Table 9), and unmatched plaids and unsecured stitching, which did not appear in this ranking (Table 10).

Less consistency was found to exist among those reasons considered least likely to affect rejection of women's sportswear. When ranking was done, those considered least likely to cause rejection were loose threads (4.05) and unsecured stitching (3.82). These findings are not consistent with those from the previous table (brand name and place of origin). Unsecured threads was listed among the most important reasons for rejection in Table 9 and in Table 10 as among the least important.

## Summary and Conclusions

Retail apparel buyers have responsibility for interpreting the needs and desires of their clientele for satisfactory products. It is their job to purchase apparel which is desirable to customers in the market segment which their store targets. Buyers are largely accountable for the success of the retail

business which employs them.

In order to meet the consumer demand for quality apparel, buyers must take quality characteristics into consideration. This study investigated the quality factors which influence apparel selections made by buyers of women's sportswear. Buyers were asked questions about their use of quality cues as a basis for apparel selection for sale in retail stores.

Buyers identified garment construction and brand name as the best indicators of garment quality from a list of nine cues. Buyers were provided this same list of nine cues and asked to rate the five they considered most important. In this situation, style was ranked as most important, followed by garment construction, brand name, and price.

These same nine cues were rated by buyers, using the Likert Scale. Results from this rating indicated that style, garment construction, and price were the most important cues in determining quality.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the relationship of buyers' formal educational background in clothing and textiles to the priority they assigned in ranking quality cues. Small sample size dictates caution in interpreting results. Buyers with clothing construction background placed greater priority on place of origin, price, and wholesaler's information. Those with advanced textiles and textile testing placed greater emphasis on origin, fabric characteristics, and garment construction. The influence of buyers' educational background on buying practices requires further investigation with a larger sample size.

Spearman's rank order correlations indicated significant relationships between rankings of quality cues and Likert Scale ratings and years of buyer experience. As years of buying increased there was a positive relation to brand name and place of origin as quality cues in the buying process. Style was negatively related to experience in the rating process and as a basis for judging quality when using the Likert Scale.

Garment characteristics which influence retail buyers' purchasing decisions were also investigated. Those most likely to cause rejection included style, seconds or irregulars, fabric flaws, price, and dye imperfections. Place of origin and loose threads were not found to be negative factors in the purchasing decision.

The role of buyers in selecting apparel for sale in the store makes it essential that the buyer be able to target a specific clientele, understand the needs of that clientele, and provide appropriate merchandise to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer (Packard, Winters, & Axelrod, 1983). Although the job responsibilities for the position of retail buyer are diverse, they all focus on one goal: to provide the goods which the ultimate customer wants. Once viewed as a relatively simple task requiring minimal training, changes in marketing structure, consumer demands, and available products have resulted in the need for trained professionals in retail buying (Packard, Winters, & Axelrod, 1983).

As Fashion Merchandising programs seek to prepare students for employment in the apparel industry, it is important to understand the roles of buyers, department managers, and fashion coordinators to which students aspire and the preparation which these positions require. Trained profession-

als in retail buying will be more knowledgeable concerning product quality and better prepared to identify garments which are likely to meet consumer expectations. They are not expected visually to determine all fabric quality problems, some of which cannot be predicted, without laboratory and wear testing. Preparation for these professional positions begins in the classroom with educa-acquire product knowledge which may be valuable in developing professionals who are prepared for an increasingly complex marketplace.

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