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Above: The Micro Cotton Hotel collection, available at Macy's. macys.com

On the vendor side, a survey conducted by Sharadha Terry Products, manufacturer of the Micro Cotton collection of bath textiles, came to similar conclusions about what consumers are looking for in towels. In the survey, in which 900 consumers from a number of different demographic groups participated, softness, absorbency, thickness and color exert the most influence on consumers' purchase decisions for towels.

Color ranked as the most important attribute in the survey. "Color was also named as the easiest-to-find bath linen feature, followed by trusted retailer name and cotton technology brand," said a statement from Sharadha Terry regarding the survey findings.

Drying Goods

Retailers and manufacturers are touting quality over price when talking about bath towels

By DAVID GILL

Once the bath towel business was almost entirely about price—shoppers went to buy towels when a sale was on and hoped that the towels would dry them off and not fall apart too soon.

While price is still important in towel purchases, today's consumers are looking for more when deciding what towels to buy. Quality—in the form of softness, performance, durability and design—has gained more in the towel-buying equation, according to retailers and manufacturers.

The element of quality came to the fore during the New York Home Fashions Market in March. During the event, Welspun Global Brands displayed its Gold Seal granted by the Cotton Egypt Association, which certifies that its bath towels, bath rugs and bedding are made with 100 percent Egyptian cotton—rather than a blend of Egyptian cotton with other materials, as is often seen on other textiles bearing labels saying that they are made with Egyptian cotton.

"Welspun takes the quality of our products very seriously," said Dipala Goenka, CEO and joint managing director of Welspun India, Welspun Global Brands' parent. "We are pleased that the association is taking such efforts to recognize the integrity behind manufacturing and providing assurances to the retail community."

That community has recognized that quality points of all types have come front and center with shoppers who are looking for new towels. "We see more of our customers responding to features and benefits when buying towels," said Kim Cropper, category manager of textiles for Shopko. "They want a towel that lasts, that has great softness and hand, that dries quickly, that resists fading and that is lofty. Loft, in fact, is an important point in a towel's perceived value."

Holly Watson, textiles buyer for At Home, agreed. "The top features consumers want are absorbency, softness and durability," Watson said. Not that price isn't still important, but consumers want to know that they are getting something good for the money they spend. "We feel that consumers are looking for better-quality towels at a value," she said.

Watson also focused on design when speaking of what consumers want out of a towel. "We have seen a shift where consumers are gravitating toward more decorative and trend-right towels," she said. "These towels offer a fun way to brighten up and add a touch of elegance to a bathroom, whether it's accenting the existing bathroom design by mixing in bath, hand or fingertip towels, or taking it one step further: by adding coordinating rugs, shower curtains and accessories."

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In other, less formal research, other attributes rank highly with consumers. "In reading online reviews of certain bath towels, softness comes up as important," said Miranda Busillo, merchandising product director for WestPoint Home. "But consumers also want a really durable towel, too. Sometimes we forget how utilitarian a towel really is, that it's meant to be used for a purpose."

The growing influence of millennial consumers has reached the towel category, and millennials have made it plain that the products they buy must have an element of eco-friendliness and sustainability, according to Busillo. And there is a further quality point here as well. "Organic materials such as cottons and bamboo produce a softer towel," she said.

For a manufacturer such as Loftex USA—which, according to Gretchen Dale, executive vice president of strategic planning, "has never been the price guy"—the greater emphasis on quality in lieu of price has been good news. "Our strength is that we have always tried to put fashion into the solid-color towel wall," Dale said, referring to the wall of stacked towels seen in many retailers' textiles departments.

Performance attributes such as quick drying, loft, durability and color fastness "are a big deal with consumers," Dale said. "Some of the biggest complaints we get are over linting, which shows that the towel is wearing away, and color fastness. Detergents that have bleaching sometimes change the color of the towel."

Even with performance attributes rising in importance with consumers, the bath towel business remains primarily price driven, in Dale's view. "It's flat as far as sales go," she said. "One reason is that there isn't a whole lot of innovation out there. We're not seeing fun in the business in the form of designs."

With this in mind, Dale said Loftex will look to find designs that inject fun back into the category. "We're looking at dobies that work like jacquards, with patterns in the border such as two rows of squares," she said. "We need something that provides a 'wow' factor in the business." ■



Left: At Home's Color Drift bath towel program. athome.com

Above: The Micro Cotton Hotel collection, available at Macy's. macys.com

Below: WestPoint Home's Unity towel program is made with organic materials and targets millennials. westpointhome.com

