

Revealed: sports bras

74 per cent of women who exercise regularly don't wear a specialist sports bra; 70 per cent of women are wearing the wrong size bra. Sports bra manufacturers Saucony, Odlo, PureLime and Shock Absorber talk to Zöe Foster about the importance of the independent sports retailer in selling a product that promises profitable returns for shops who are prepared to act as specialist fitters to the female customer.

I run, swim, enjoy mountain biking, play tennis and a lot more; yet until recently I didn't own a sports bra. I have always bought support tops as I didn't consider that a bra could give me as much support – my assumption was wrong, now I'm most certainly a convert. The support top relies on compression to stop breast movement, which works, but often I found that I had to 'break them in' as initially they they can feel restrictive around the chest. The sports bras we have looked at have specifically been designed for high-impact exercise and the buzz word for the fit of the bra is encapsulation – which means that the breasts are not flattened to the chest but are supported by the bra cup shape which in turn is supported by the chest band and shoulder straps.

As a woman who loves sport, my previous experiences of finding an 'over shoulder boulder holder' have been a nightmare, sizing can be all over the place and it's hard to know if you have the right size until you next go to the gym and the straps keep falling off the shoulders or, worse still, you end up with two black eyes; it's no surprise to find that 70 per cent of women are wearing the wrong bra size for everyday wear. Shock Absorber research suggests that 74 per cent of women who exercise regularly don't even wear a



Purelime



Purelime

specialist sports bra (Source: Omnibus study Dec 2004) - which is a startling three out of four women. Like shoes, bras either fit or they don't. You wouldn't run in a pair of ill-fitting shoes because of the obvious health issues, so why not treat the breast with the same respect?

Joanne Scurr of Portsmouth University is a breast biomechanics expert: she has found that encapsulation rather than compression bras are better at reducing breast movement in women of all cup sizes. Scurr's research proves that breasts move far more than ordinary bras are designed to cope with; they move in a figure of eight, sideways, in and out and up and down. In fact breasts move as much during slow jogging as they do at maximum sprint speed. Dr Scurr said: "We discovered that the speed at which the breasts move changes during the running cycle. And we found that the subjects experienced the greatest degree of pain and discomfort during the points at which the breast was in the process of accelerating or decelerating."

Martina Alexander, Senior Brand Manager for Shock Absorber, says: "A popular misconception is that there is muscle in the breast; once the tissue and the Cooper's Ligaments (connective tissue in the breast) are stretched they are beyond repair, no toning exercises can restore them." With the average 36C breast



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weighing between 250- 300 grams, movement puts great strain on the breast's fragile support structure, which comprises the outer skin and Cooper's Ligaments.

Scurr's research team has tested around 50 bra designs on hundreds of women over the past three years. Her research proves that breasts move up to 21cm during exercise in multiple directions, which questions the fact that many bras are designed to limit just vertical movement. She is hoping to use cutting edge technology in 'intelligent materials' to help develop smart fabrics which can change to provide custom-made support for each woman which varies depending on the wearer's level of activity.

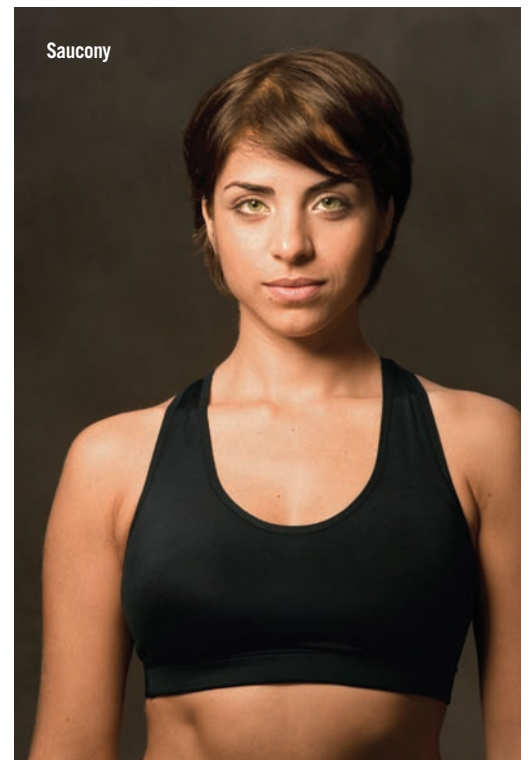
I find it really heartening that all of the companies I have spoken to within the course of researching this article, even the ones not specifically devoted to just undergarments have done their research on the breast and have looked at Scurr's research. They are getting expert knowledge. For example, PureLime are working alongside Bravissimo (renowned bra company). "Our relationship with Bravissimo has enabled us to draw on their vast experience and expertise to develop bra's and swimwear that fits real women and provides them with the correct level of support," says Rachel Jenkins, Sales Manager.

What the sports retailer now has to do is to educate ladies, to get fitted for the right size and style. Wendy

Hedger, a researcher on Dr Scurr's team, said: "Many women have strong preferences for certain styles of bra and won't buy anything else. They won't even look at anything that doesn't look like the sort of bra they are used to wearing. In sports bras, for example, many women won't buy a bra that resembles their everyday bra and does up at the back – they think if it can't be pulled over their heads like a crop top then it's not a real sports bra. But this is not true and many sports bras do up at the back in the same way as a traditional bra and do a very good job of supporting women."

Sizing and customer education?

I asked Ian Latham, UK Sales Manager for Odlo how they are tackling the sizing issue. "We researched the brands on the high street and there wasn't a standard we could base our bra sizing on as they all differed slightly," said Ian. "The measurement across the cups is where you get an anomaly across the brands as the cup shape can be different – so we feel it is important to get measured for a bra. Getting the sizing correct will certainly make a difference to how the bra performs. The very neat point of sale that we have produced comes complete with tape measures so ladies can even measure themselves unaided if necessary for the correct fit." Odlo's tape measure is really easy to use on your own, which means that even if you're in a shop with all male staff it wouldn't be a problem to take your



Saucony

measurements and refer to the size guide.

Saucony's Paul Heywood, who have recently entered the bra market says: "There's an opportunity to be had here, as finding the right shoe is the same as finding the



ODLO

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right bra, once you find a brand you trust you don't change." As a sports woman I would agree and would urge bra manufacturers to maintain their sizing through quality control as there's nothing more annoying than finding you're a 36C initially and then in six months, when you're sure you haven't changed size, their sizes differ. That wouldn't happen in shoe sizes within a brand and it really shouldn't happen in clothing.

So with the brands making a conscious effort to make bra sizing efficient for customers, how do they feel their product should be represented in the market place?

Rachel Jenkins, Sales Manager at PureLime: "The high level of customer service provided by independent sports retailers is key to educate women about the importance of wearing the correct bra size and deliver a fitting service. PureLime provides bra fitting training sessions, which will enable staff to have an in-depth knowledge of how to assess, fit and sell the correct size bra for each individual customer."

Two fitting tips that I picked up from Rachel are: In terms of fitting a bra it should not slip up the back as it loses its supportive qualities and everything falls downwards. Also, when you buy a bra it should fit on the first hook, so as its worn and washed you can

tighten it up on the hooks. When it gets to the tightest extension it is time to get a new one.

So here stands a convert to sports bras and I will be recommending them to my daughter and friends too.

Never again will I go and buy a support top or sports bra without trying it on in the shop – all the companies I have spoken strongly recommended getting fitted properly for their products. Even if the sizing did become regulated so all companies had the same system, a customer would still need to try a bra on.

For specialist retailers there is an enormous opportunity to show the

same amount of expertise about a sports bra, as say, trainers. The customer will expect help with fitting which can be achieved with the minimal amount of embarrassment even if you have male staff – just follow your size

guides and invest in good point of sale material; in fact, POS is essential as without a good display boxed product will soon be littering the floor. My recommendation to aid sales is to display the sizing guides in each changing room. Also pay attention to



Saucony

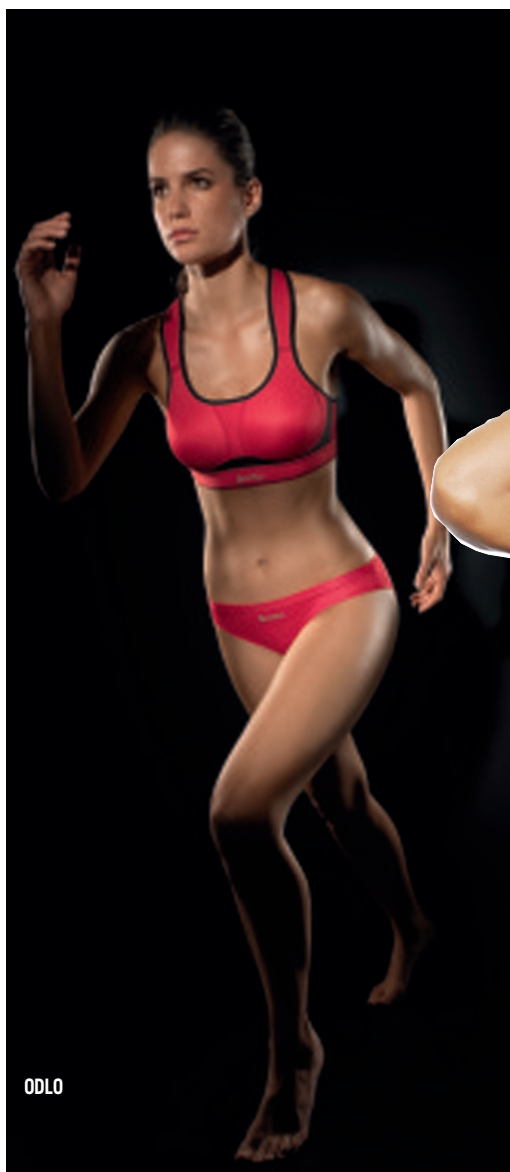


Shock Absorber

how bra shops sell their product and allow the customer to take a few styles and sizes into the changing room so they don't have to get in and out of their clothes to come out of the changing room for a size change.

5 tips to help you retail sports bras

- The average bra size of women in the UK is 34D – remember this when ordering a range of sizes.
- Know the sizing of the brands you stock – some are back size smaller, cup size larger, some are direct equivalent sizes to regular bra measurements.
- Always, always have a tape measure in the shop.
- Position bras near ladies' running shoes; a sports bra is a genuine necessity for women and a sound investment, so upsell with shoes!
- Don't be embarrassed asking a woman's bra size, whatever your gender. Know your subject and be confident discussing it and you'll get long-term customer as a result.



ODLO

Field test

We have chosen to look at the bras suitable for running which requires the greatest level of control that can be achieved. The criteria we've found to be necessary for a comfortable run are a good fit that doesn't restrict breathing and that keeps everything in its place, and straps that don't cut in on the shoulders. The other attributes that are nice to have in a sports bra are good wicking fabric, that washes well and doesn't retain any odour. And one other thing – ease of exit; it sounds elementary but when hot, sticky and worn out from exercising, escapology is the last thing you want to learn.

Saucony

Considering they have only recently entered the bra market Saucony has certainly put the same attention to detail into the bra as they do in their shoes. Paul Heywood, Saucony's Sales Rep for North of England and Scotland said: "In the female running sector, apart from your shoes the most important thing a lady will need is a bra." And I have to agree that the upsell opportunity is enormous in running shops; first fit the shoes and then mention bras. As part of their introduction to the market Saucony had the bra on their London Marathon Expo stand and according to Paul, "it has been well received and is a definite area of growth." Saucony has two new bras, Nexus and Motion Adjust, available soon.

Saucony - Motion Sensor bra.

- Comfortable and performs to perfection when running.
- Padded with seamless cups.
- The cup shape is subtly flatter than an everyday bra which disperses the breast and reduces bounce.
- Straps are fairly wide which I would have expected to control the impact when running and are cut to sit in the middle of the shoulder which keeps them from cutting into the trapezius (the muscle that sits on the top of the shoulder).
- Hooked and clasped at the back, for easy exit.
- Fits identical to a regular bra size.
- Coolmax fabric.

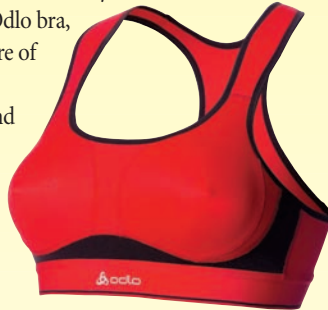


Odlo

Odlo have a new range which has taken 18 months of development. "What we've done is produced the Ultimate sports bra, technically correct, looks good and does the job it's meant to do," said Ian Latham, UK Sales Manager. "We had a range before but this takes it to new level. It's about comfort, the moldings for each cup size are individually formed, ensuring a perfect fit."

Odlo - High ultimate fit.

- Performs very well and has an added bonus: As many distance runners will appreciate there is a tendency to roll the shoulders forward when tired; I found that the high cross back, formed by fabric in the Odlo bra, made me aware of shoulder positioning and posture.
- The material used in the cup, the strap section and at the sides is Performer Pique effect, which promotes minimal mechanical elasticity for best hold.
- Chest band is flocked for comfort under the bust.
- Cushioned, anatomically shaped straps across the collar bones.
- It's hooked and clasped at the back, for easy exit.
- Fitting is gauged using the Odlo tape measure and point of sale.
- To deal with odour they use "effect by ODLO." This fabric has silver ions in the fibre to stop bacteria multiplying; as this is within the fabric it will be less likely to wash out.



Also on offer:
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Shock Absorber

Launched 1995 with the sole aim to support the breast during exercise. They are part of DB Apparel which also owns Wonderbra. "Wearing a regular T-shirt bra during exercise reduces bounce by an average of 38 per cent, however it has been found that women fitted with a Shock Absorber sports bra reduces breast bounce by up to 74 per cent. Last year we were named Best Sports Bra by Runner's World which was a fantastic accolade for us," said Martina Alexander. "We spend a lot of marketing investment in leading the way in educating women to wear a sports bra. We go to many consumer shows like the Marathon Expo, the Vitality Show, the Metro Ski show and the Triathlon Show so that we reach all the people that are thinking of taking up sport or doing a sport to educate them on why they need a sports bra and get them professionally fitted. This is also important to the retailers as we can drive traffic to their stores. We have sponsored events and we are about to launch a promotion to educate young girls to the importance of wearing sports bras as some are taking part in sport to a high level." Tests have shown that even among A cups breast movement ranged up to an average of 40mm away from the resting place of the body, which can lead to breast sag.

Shock Absorber - 4490 bra

- I can see why this is Shock Absorber's best seller – great running bra.
- The high performance fabric is beautiful and the cut cleverly combines two fabrics to form the cups; the inner is firm which encapsulates the breast and the outer is soft and more elastic for comfort.
- Chest band material flocked for comfort under the bust.
- Hooked and clasped at the back, for easy exit.
- Shoulder strap adjusters.
- Fitting is categorised by the 'Support level chart' which according to Shock Absorber's research is based not only on the impact of the sport being undertaken but also on the cup size worn – so a smaller busted woman will not need as high a level of support as the larger bust.
- Shock Absorber predict that as of January they will have the widest size range of bras as they will be offering from a AA to a HH cup, and from a 28 to a 44 inch back. So even if a retailer cannot hold all the sizes there is the ability to select the size range that they think best suits their shopper. Also they can special order a size for a customer.



SHOCK ABSORBER