

## An Apparel Summit Looks to Source the Future



The Colorado Apparel Manufacturing Summit took place last month in a North Denver warehouse turned design center. It was standing room only, and with tickets at twenty-four dollars a pop, there was no doubt about the enthusiasm of the crowd of two hundred or so.

The event sponsors had assembled a distinguished panel representing six homegrown companies. The execs sat informally on stools to discuss with the audience their take on making apparel in Colorado. The idea was that after sharing their secrets to apparel success, and illustrating the challenges, there would be time for some give and take between the audience and the panelists.

That sort of happened. Of the six businesses on the panel, only one actually owns sewing machines, the other five buy their product from a factory somewhere. That makes them brands, not manufacturers. Talented, charismatic and successful individuals all, the shared viewpoint when

challenged with why they don't make sewn product in our state, was that they were unable to get it. Or as one panelist put it, "I can't buy a million units in Colorado."

The disconnect was instant and obvious; the core audience in that room had no intention of making a million units of anything.

The brands want to stay as they are, doing the design and marketing; with purchasing and production marching along to the seasons and ship dates. The only change in the minds of the brand execs is just buying their product from factories here in the USA. That kind of production, satisfying big orders on a specific date, is done with large scale, line style sewing; think long rows of operators doing repetitive tasks and supplying finished goods in bulk.

Colorado's Front Range has a rich history of making outdoor and ski apparel, sleeping bags, packs and tents, and it's always been

done in a small shop way. Colorado's sewing industry is modest and artisan based, with production teams in constant motion, i.e., a steady supply of specialty product coming off the line. This production model is much the same as how super- high-end cars are made, by smaller groups of involved and talented workers. No one in the audience at the Summit wants to build a huge t-shirt factory in Denver.

Manufacturing in Colorado is expanding by following the business model our grandfathers used. Instead of trading on a good reputation in a small town, we now find community in the web of the Internet. Our product continues to be focused on lifestyle and technical expertise; with design and manufacturing in a constant dance of relentless, real-time improvement. We make things we care about and we're good at it, just like the old days. Craft over commodity.

The companies that do invest

in actually making sewn product here intend to take it to market by themselves, as one important Denver supplier said to me after the meeting, "...that was great, except ... all of my customers are selling direct."

Until about 30 years ago the majority of the outdoor lifestyle apparel sold in Colorado was made here and traded through a few stores and a company's warmly welcomed catalog. Change catalog to Instagram and broaden the vision to include activewear and fashion, and you pretty much end up with what the group gathered in that room was thinking. What was out of step that night at the conference was the predominant business model on display, i.e., a world where big containers full of inexpensively made product fly around to meet a delivery schedule dictated by some retailer's Christmas catalog. Or as I whispered to a mentor seated next to me, "I don't think anyone in this room intends to follow the people on those stools." ●