

Made in Colorado



My home state likes to do things a little differently. Colorado recently formed the Colorado Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry and instead of appointing a political talking head, our beer-brewing geologist governor went out and appointed a climber to direct the effort. His name is Luis Benitez, and he is an accomplished alpinist, outdoorsman and guide.

This is a brilliant choice for more reasons than the great PR and obvious national media stories such a character presents. Climbers are known as relentless and committed organizers, their ranks long united against gravity, a common and unwavering enemy. It is in the DNA of the climbing community to share contact and route knowledge as is a world-view best represented by a pot-luck-dinner sensibility, many hands make light work.

Mr. Benitez's plan is based on the same framework; get an industry to communicate with itself, and then get out of the way as it organically

grows and shapes into natural coalitions. The goals of the newly minted office are the laudable foursquare of; land stewardship, industry development, economic development and education. The means are decidedly grassroots.

"Fifty percent of my job is just getting the people to talk to each other that are in the same world," said Benitez during our recent interview. His office is putting its modest budget where its mouth is, and is now working with business data bank BizWest to complete the first Colorado Outdoor Industry Resource guide. It should be online by this September.

The contributions of small outdoor companies are also called out by Benitez, "It is not about the 500 person company, or even the 50 person company. Currently, it is small batch manufacturing that is driving innovation." He correctly ascribes the expertise to enthusiasm; like when skiers turn into ski designers and then into ski

makers, the outdoor industry is driven by passion for sport and a deep DIY streak. Then he mentions the looming break in the chain, "But it isn't a repeatable model." The barrier to small-scale manufacturing is education, capturing the nuance that a skilled artisan learns, and passing it on.

Wisely, the new outdoor office is working closely with the Colorado Mountain College, a regional gem with its eleven campuses and thirty thousand students, to further degree programs in the industrial arts surrounding the Colorado outdoor industry. From pressing skis to stitching backpacks, it will be a challenge to sort out the many vocational paths needed, however, the very idea of capturing industrial knowledge is trend-right and noteworthy.

Crowdsourcing and a competitive marketplace are both overused terms, but what if a community like ours can talk to itself and solve its own problems and in doing so we evolve into a cooperative marketplace

instead of a competitive one? What if sharing a little beta gives everyone a better shot at success?

There is a growing sense in Colorado that we are a brand, not unlike any other, and an increasing cultural recognition of the significant outdoor recreation dollars that pour into our mountains like seasonal clockwork. The outdoor industry is guesstimated nationwide at \$650 billion annually with Colorado and the surrounding western states getting a disproportionate share of that take. With more money to be made in the hills than under them, the outdoor industry is getting to sit at the big table with the traditional western industries like agriculture, energy and mining. This seems to be our time and place.

It will be interesting to watch and participate in the Colorado Outdoor Group model; i.e. a relatively small collection of companies, well organized and intellectually rich, who cooperatively reach into an expanding international outdoor market and carve out a big ol' chunk of business for itself. With the support of a forward thinking governor, our climbing guide just might lead us there. ●

Disclaimer: Mr. Gray hasn't always lived in the Centennial State; it was still a territory when he first arrived. It is no wonder that the publisher doesn't haphazardly and without reflection share his views. Send a note to simplygraydesign@gmail.com or see full color photos: Instagram @ [simplygraydesign](https://www.instagram.com/simplygraydesign)