

Think Globally, Sew Locally: Denver Knits Together a Garment Trade



Ralph's Power Sewing Machines has been in a low concrete block building lying in the industrial area surrounding Denver's football stadium for over 40 years. It sports a modest sales floor that shares space with a few mid-century wood paneled offices; the repair shop is across the small parking lot out back. The interior décor can only be described as "painted" with the odd Juki calendar on a wall staring out into space above the rows of sewing machines. However unassuming it appears at first glance, rest assured that Ralph's is the touchstone of the garment trade in Denver and beyond; the business provides the needed mechanical support,

intellectual reference, and community connection.

Ralph's is an analog place. Fax tones are often heard and receipts always involve multiple copies and register tapes, all neatly stapled together. Stacks of paper occupy every horizontal surface while white boards and corkboards and fields of post-it-notes line the office walls. The giant version in the sales office chronicles, in the four major dry erase colors, the sewing machines that are coming, leaving, and on layaway. My name was up on that board for a while, in green ink.

Out the front door and around the corner is the Parts

Department, which is the beating heart of the place. Mechanics, who always look a little stressed out, pace and wave hand-written requisition forms, while disembodied voices call out eight digit numbers from the deep queue of shelving. They say there's upwards of a million parts back there. Customers are given one narrow aisle behind a row of bright, clean glass display cases from which to watch the activity. We happily wait our turn while squeezing past one another puzzling over the shiny mechanical baubles and stately cones of industrial thread. Patrons often engage in idle conversations or listen in on someone else's problems like babushkas over a backyard fence.

When it's your turn—to present your challenge, ask for advice, or request a part—it doesn't matter; the people who work at Ralph's listen carefully and actually try to help you. The staff is a stalwart ally in the insanely complex world of needle, thread, foot and folder.

A couple of years ago Ralph's accomplished what political committees, corporations and the bastions of higher education in our area had been unable to do; the company gave birth to a community apparel design center.

Next door in a nearly identical building is the Denver Design Incubator. Consisting of mostly one good-sized room with an assembly of sewing machines situated around a big cutting table; the DDI has the same Midwestern sensibility as the enterprise that supports it. It is administered separately from Ralph's and has its own non-profit status and board of directors, but physically and emotionally it remains close to the business.

For a modest monthly fee anyone can join and get access to the tools and mentorship needed to sew a broad spectrum of goods. The DDI website says it best:

"DDI is a space for people to build their skills from concept to production as they develop commercial apparel or accessory lines. Our goal is to foster marketable, profitable, and sustainable fashion companies right here in Colorado.

The best part of DDI is our collaborative community — this is a space where we share knowledge, lend a hand, and give feedback. Some are just starting out; others are established movers-and-shakers — and that's what makes our community unique."

When the whole USA reshoring wave began to swell a few years ago, Ralph's didn't sit and stew and wonder what they should do, they acted. They began the long process of creating customers from scratch and steeled themselves for the investment to do so. The payoff is obvious when you see the guys from the machine shop grilling hot dogs with the DDI dressmakers or when reading articles in the local paper about the hip Denver sewn goods scene. From backpacks to fast fashion, the Mile High City is exploding with small-scale start-ups. Ralph's has knitted together a varied sewing industry that will grow, and in turn hopefully support another 40 years of business.

Ralph's formula for success is simple; build community and forge relationships. They get it. People make clothing with sewing machines, not the other way around. Pretty good for a bunch of folks still using filing cabinets. ●