

Minus33 Banks on Expertise, Quality

From its start as woolen mill L.W. Packard, the brand has a 100-year history to draw from when creating Merino apparel

BY Tony Gatto

Minus33 might not have rocketed to its current place in the Merino apparel market as quickly as competitors Smartwool or Icebreaker, but that's been a deliberate business decision, said Minus33's Assistant Sales Manager Joel Schweizer.

"We're a small, conservative company. We play everything safe. We pay our bills," Schweizer said. "Some of the other companies may work for a bank and it allows them to do new colors every year or close out product lines, but we prefer to offer a product to our customers that they can come back and get every year."

This philosophy is rooted in the brand's history. Before taking on Merino apparel as Minus33, several founding employees worked at L.W. Packard, a textile manufacturer based in Ashland, N.H. When L.W. Packard moved its machinery overseas in 2002, the company started Minus33 as a snowmobile apparel brand.

"But we quickly realized that market is a very small market, and very subject to snow and weather, so we went to the more broad space of general thermal underwear," Schweizer said. While he wasn't one of the original L.W. Packard employees, he started at Minus33 in 2005, when the brand was still getting off the ground.

The L.W. Packard mill first opened in 1916, giving employees a 100-plus year heritage in wool to draw from. Many of them, including L.W. Packard President John Glidden, worked as textile engineers. And Minus33 still operates in one of the buildings on the original mill site. In a sign of the times, many of the other buildings have been converted to an eclectic mix of different manufacturers, storage facilities, and a store that sells fireplaces.

CHANGES AHEAD SIGNAL CONTROLLED GROWTH

But "conservative" by no means translates into "stagnant" for Minus33. In fact, this past year, the brand started revamping all of its lightweight and midweight fabrics. It's using a new, compact spun yarn that increases durability.

"I have some of our products that are maybe close to 10 years old," Schweizer said. "And I still wear them every winter. But the compact spun, we believe it will make them even longer-lasting compared to that."



Minus33 is still headquartered in one of the old mill's buildings



L.W. Packard sold its machinery in 2002

The brand is also working on becoming more year-round. It released a lightweight underwear offering for women last year, as a response to requests for a women's version of a popular boxer-brief style, and new products point to more lightweight and midweight offerings. In some ways, it has been year-round for awhile, as it always keeps some of its core products in stock to fill international orders south of the equator.

Minus33 is also starting to make inroads into new demographics. It debuted a kids' thermal top and bottom, and added navy and desert sand color options as a way to attract customers in military and law enforcement.

The children's garments proved an interesting challenge from a design standpoint, as kids are incredibly picky about what they'll wear and how garments feel next to their skin, Schweizer said. In the end, the brand solved the challenge by focusing on fit, and ensuring the garments are relaxed enough that children can move easily in them.

VALUE AT LOWER PRICE A KEY SELLING POINT

The biggest issue the brand faces in the market right now is increasing awareness. Schweizer believes the brand's best edge is its pricing; it's at a lower price point than Smartwool and Icebreaker. For example, Minus33's men's midweight crew, the Chocorua, is listed at \$80.99 on its website, while similar products from Smartwool and Icebreaker are listed at \$100 to \$120.

The Chocorua, and its partner bottom the Kancamagus, are some of the brand's top sellers, along with the women's midweight crew (Osipee) and the Day Hiker sock. All

of these are products that Schweizer recommends to retailers looking to stock the brand for the first time. Another is the Kodiak Expedition Full Zip hoodie. It's a higher price point, \$174.99, but Schweizer called it a "fan favorite, and a show stopper."

"It's a 400-weight expedition fabric, but brushed so it has a nice finish on the inside. It's very warm, very thick, and can even replace your jacket if you want it to," he added.

Ultimately what customers respond most to is the value they see in the brand, Schweizer said. Not only is Minus33 competitive when it comes to pricing, but he feels the product is top notch.

"We're a 100-year-old woolen mill, so we know woolens, know everything about wool, and we're just trying to showcase that," he said. "Customers know they're going to get a good quality product for the price that they pay." 

From the Fall '15 Collections



Kodiak Expedition Full Zip Hoodie

Minus33's Men's Kodiak Expedition Full Zip Hoodie is 400 squared g/m of brushed interlock knit construction with a wool and fleece interior. Flatlock seams prevent chafing while the rib knit cuffs provide thumb holes. The hoodie is machine washable and dryable.

Zealand Lightweight Hipster

Minus33's Zealand Lightweight Hipster is a new style with flat lock seams to prevent chafing. The under garment is machine washable and dryable.

