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JP-based menswear brand's recent growth defied industry trends

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 25, 2011 10:00 AM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Jamaica Plain-based Inseam Clothing, owned by John Robb (left) and Jeff Diaz, didn't just survive during the recession, it thrived.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

As Jeff Diaz and John Robb reflect over how their men's clothing business started 11 years ago, they're taken aback by how far the company has come.

For five years, they sewed their entire inventory – a couple thousand garments – on a lone sewing machine that caught fire from overuse. Now, the business now hires six full-time seamstresses in East Boston. And, instead of purchasing 400 to 500 yards of cotton each year, they buy that amount per order, and place orders about 10 times a year.

Standing in a first-floor room in their rented mixed-use office studio and living space in Jamaica Plain, the couple and business co-owners, both in their mid-40s and together for around 12 years, rattle off various figures glancing at each other with a mix of disbelief and pride.

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"Really?," Diaz asks Robb at one point. Leaning over a table where the clothing designs are fashioned, Diaz briefly pauses as his face shows he's doing calculations in his head. "Yeah, You're right -- Wow," he says with a surprised look and a smile.

And, the duo also modestly relishes in describing how their brand **Inseam Clothing** experienced some of its most substantial growth during the recent economic downturn as other industry retailers struggled.

Their clothing line, geared primarily toward gay men, saw sales figures rise 10 percent in 2008, another 10 percent jump in 2009 followed by a rise of more than 15 percent last year, they said. There was a tripling of web sales both in the US and abroad, and the brand is now carried at retailers as near as New York City and as distant as a pair of stores in Australia.

However, plagued by increasingly-price-conscious shoppers during the recession, industry-wide sales in menswear slumped 2.5 percent from 2008 to 2010, according to marketing research company The NPD Group.

Inseam was founded in 2000 out of a basement in Provincetown. But, the summertime seasonal retail market there wasn't enough to sustain the growing company year round, especially as signs of the recession began to creep in.

So, four years ago, they relocated to JP. They closely managed their brand's expansion, keeping their operation flexible to various market factors and careful not to accrue significant debt.

"We thought to take a more conservative approach to expanding," Diaz said. "After the dust settled, a lot of other companies that were our competitors dropped off."

And, keeping the company, with annual sales in the six-digit range, at a manageable size has become a point of distinction for Inseam.

"We're personable, hands-on with our design and quality," said Robb, a Boston native.

Using a very similar home sewing machine as the one they used when they founded the company, they still hand-craft their own designs and samples from scratch for every apparel piece they sell. And, the machine is also used to affix the company's label on each item.

"Our customer service is impeccable," added Diaz, a native of Puerto Rico who said local customers stop in on occasion to have Inseam clothes they bought tailored. "We don't lie. If someone asks 'does this look horrible on me,' we tell them if it does."

"Everything, before we ship it, we've got to inspect it," as part of quality control, he said. "That's what sets us apart from everyone else."

The company's core product is its line of pants – a constant mix of seven uniform-inspired designs with a durable part-dress, part-casual look, or as they put it, "for both work and play."

"The idea is to make someone feel good while they're wearing it," said Robb.

"You notice the detail, but it's not jumping out at you. You don't want someone to walk in and have people say, 'what are you wearing,'" added Diaz, who, like Robb, was dressed in a pair of their brand's pants.

In addition to the selling around 3,000 pants yearly, Inseam also sells around

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6,000 T-shirts, around 1,000 hats and recently began adding woven shirt and short designs to the brand.

During the two to four weeks it takes to create each new look, from computer and hand-sketched blueprints to putting the design into full production, unexpected obstacles are somewhat of a guarantee, they said. Keeping each item within its targeted retail cost can be a challenge. Cotton prices can fluctuate significantly over the course of several hours. Certain materials in certain colors can suddenly become unavailable.

"There's no rhyme or reason why a lot of the time," said Diaz. "You have to go with the punches."

But, when external factors change, "It works to your advantage in some ways because you'll end up creating a new look," said Robb. "You want to keep it fresh."

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Inseam owners and couple Jeff Diaz (left) and John Robb run their business out of a combined 450 square feet across two rooms in their home. One is the quiet basement pictured here. The other is on the first floor above.

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