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Hiking know-how

Grace Chen, President of Hakers Enterprise, says that the outdoors apparel brand is seeking to stand out in the market with its constantly evolving product line.

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Mountain hiking might not be part of the job description for most; however, for Grace Chen, the President of Hakers Enterprise, it falls firmly under the banner of product research and development. Grace explains that this integral step in developing outdoors apparel presents its own unique challenges at 3,000 metres above sea level, but she notes the importance of delivering a finished product that meets high customer expectations.

For Grace, apparel manufacturing is the family business, with her father having founded Hakers in Taiwan in 1986. She had spent time away from the business, including undertaking an MBA at the University of California in Irvine, but when her father was diagnosed with cancer she'd returned to Taiwan to help him out. »



Grace explains that while she and her father had sought to maintain and grow Hakers' manufacturing business, they had also harboured the goal of developing another division of the brand. It was, however, another five years following her return before the inception of the outdoors apparel business under the Hakers banner, and during this time Grace worked in the company's sales department, gaining a critical understanding of its operations.

The knowledge that she gained would in turn be put to good use in launching the Hakers-branded outdoors apparel line in 2013, the origins of which stem from her father's passion for hiking. She explains that despite the company's extensive experience in clothing manufacturing, the move into new market territory had presented a series of challenges that in turn needed to be navigated.

"Among the items we started with was a three-in-one waterproof jacket, with the insulation layer inside, which is especially

necessary in China and Taiwan in the winter," she states. "You can decide whether to wear both or just one of the layers.

"We had good sales to start with; however, the challenge then came after that, because when we wanted to expand, three products were simply not enough. We had to then focus on product development, and this presented a number of challenges from a manufacturing perspective, as we didn't have the manufacturing background to produce the whole product line."

Grace explains that an intense learning process ensued, as she set about determining what should be produced and the technology and manufacturing processes that would be required to develop the product line. "The first two years were about reinvention, and for the two years following that, the challenge was marketing," she states. "The retail side has been a very different area for us because beforehand we were focused on apparel manufacturing for other people, not ourselves.

"We are now actually doing the work of three companies. The first is the brand itself, designing what the customer wants; then as the manufacturer of the product; and lastly, the sales side, retailing to the customer. People are very interested in our story, because it is quite rare for an apparel manufacturer to start a brand and then sell it. It certainly has been very challenging but also rewarding."

Grace stresses that while establishing its presence in the market, Hakers is constantly focused on evolving its product line. She says it has consciously sought to differentiate its offering, rather than simply replicate what other companies are doing. From product design to manufacturing to marketing, it's an all-encompassing process, and Grace points to the overriding importance of brand authenticity.

First-hand experience is, of course, invaluable, and Grace explains that part of the product research and development process is hiking in the mountains of Taiwan. This provides important insight into customer requirements, with Hakers also consulting with hiking professionals.

"The whole team will go hiking. We each put on a heavy backpack and then go for two or three days," she states of the process. "We talk about our design and how we could improve upon it, especially when the weather is challenging, in stormy conditions and with snow on the mountains. It can be extremely hard work climbing a 3,000-metre mountain, but it is also a lot of fun for the team. The key is to establish: Why are we designing this product? I approach it as if I am the customer, and when I go hiking I will think about what I want to wear. If the product doesn't fit my own requirements, I won't produce it."

Hakers currently has eight stores in Taiwan and three in China, along with the online sales component of the business. Grace emphasises the importance of customer interaction and feedback. "I analyse the customer reports every week, for every store that we have, which provide insight into what our best-selling

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products are and why, and also into which products are not selling and why customers don't like them," she explains. "With this in mind, every week and every season, we are changing our products, our product lines, and our product designs."

Grace notes that one of the challenges for a start-up brand is developing an identity. She emphasises the importance of gaining customer trust and also points to the need to educate customers about the technical aspects of hiking clothing – which pieces are best suited for which conditions. She stresses the importance of this communication in developing a direct connection with customers.

"The hard part for a start-up brand is gaining the customers' trust," she shares. "It is very important, because people may have never heard of the brand. Therefore, you have to make sure that your product is good, and as part of this process we are always trying to improve to meet our customers' demands. We have to ensure that our product is worth their investment. When our customers go up into the mountains, or when they go travelling, we have to ensure that they can wear these items and feel comfortable and safe while also looking good." ■

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