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Entrepreneur: Tailor made

Company finds niche repairing flawed clothes made overseas

Boston Business Journal - by Lisa van der Pool

Jeff Glassman, president of Darn It Inc., reinvented his father's business.

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For nearly three decades, Jeff Glassman's family-owned manufacturing business, **Ronnie Manufacturing Co.**, found success making women's sportswear for a large spectrum of retailers, from JCPenney to Nordstrom.

But after the New Bedford company's heyday in the '70s and '80's, lucrative clothing contracts began to drift offshore where cheaper labor could be found. The company floundered, and eventually closed in 1995.

"My customers, instead of coming to me, started going elsewhere — to Costa Rica, Mexico and Honduras," said Glassman, 40. "We were paying people between $10 and $14 an hour and they were getting the same garment for 40 cents an hour."

A year later, Glassman reinvented his father's business and opened Darn It Inc. Instead of manufacturing clothing, the company repairs garments that have been made overseas but arrive in the United States with slight imperfections, such as incorrect washing instructions, grease spots or a misplaced button. The company also serves as a boutique warehouse for companies that don't have the overhead and labor to store large quantities of clothing.

Over 10 years later, Darn It is set to hit over $4 million in revenue this year, up from $3.8 million in 2007. The company — which grew its employee base 10 percent to 115 people this year — is also in the process of moving into a new 314,000-square-foot warehouse that the company purchased for $1.65 million in July. The new building is a crucial vehicle for the company to grow the warehousing side of its business.

But Glassman is realistic about the economy.

"Given the state of the economy and of retail, we want to stay flat next year," Glassman said.

Back in 1968 Jeff's father, Norman Glassman, founded Ronnie Manufacturing in New Bedford, which made everything from inexpensive slacks to fine-tailored ladies blazers.

The company grew to more than 300 employees. But in the early '90s large clothing retailers began to send their work offshore, and suddenly Ronnie Manufacturing started to look like a manufacturing dinosaur, with a model that was about to become extinct.

In 1990, the company shifted gears and made fleece garments because the company was close to Malden Mills, which manufactured fleece fabric. Jeff joined his father's business in 1994 after a short stint working at Filene's.

But making fleece clothing couldn't save the business and in 1995 the Glassman's made the painful decision to lay off more than 300 people and shuttered the company. It kept a small plant open to continue making fleece garments.

Soon after the company closed, Glassman began to hear from customers that they had quality problems with their overseas shipments; he was eventually convinced that he could start a business that focused on fixing clothing.

Today, Darn It offers a variety of services including clothing inspection, dry cleaning, alterations, button repairs and mold removal. The company also offers storage and package fulfillment.

More than 1.5 million garments pass through the facility yearly and it charges from 15 cents for minor repairs to $15 for leather dry cleaning.

The company does have competitors. One is Woopps, a garment refurbisher in Secaucus, N.J.

"I think it's a great story — to take a business that was essentially part of an industry that was leaving the area and to be able to create a role for themselves is great," said Dana Barrette, senior director of operations at the **Boston Apparel Group** in Taunton. Barrette has worked with Darn It for over two years on repackaging and repairs.

Glenn Cook, president of Providence-based Turfer Sportswear, recently began working with Darn It, but he said he hopes that the company will give his line of team sportswear a "competitive edge."

Moving forward, Glassman is trying elevate the Darn It brand nationally to expand the business to more retailers. Glassman's father is still involved with the company, directing operations in the refurbishment department. He also holds the title of treasurer.

On his company's reinvention, Glassman doles out words of advice to all entrepreneurs: "You never know until you try," Glassman said.