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Stepping up sales

Korkers relaunches brand and targets more than just Pacific Northwest fly fishers

BY ERIK SIEMERS
BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Throughout its 52-year history, Korkers Inc. has produced boots for the fly fishing market, making it a niche brand in a footwear market so small nobody tracks its size.

But two weeks ago the Portland-based footwear firm relaunched its brand as part of a broader strategy to gain traction in the estimated \$1 billion market for outdoor footwear.

And traction is the key.

The new Korkers — replete with an updated logo and redesigned website — aims to define itself as experts in “adaptable traction footwear.”

In other words, it has designed footwear for use on icy terrain, in which the wearer can switch from rubber soles to metal-studded soles or to felt bottoms without having to take off their boots.

“We’re basing our future ... around this adaptable traction footwear,” said CEO Sean Beers.

The products are more than just a novelty to Beers, a former general manager of footwear at Washington County-based Columbia Sportswear Co. who also oversaw the company’s Sorel winter boot brand.

In many ways, Korkers sees itself as the missing link in outdoor footwear technology.

“In the cold weather boot industry, everybody can provide warmth. Everybody can keep the foot dry,” Beers said. “But no company can provide true ice traction.”

That’s not to say it hasn’t been tried.

While at Columbia, Beers said the company even consulted chemists to find a way to give rubber soles better traction on ice.

Korkers’ solution to the problem dates back to its roots, when founder Sherman Smith used scrap rubber and carbide spikes to create “river cleats” for traversing the Rogue River near Grants Pass.

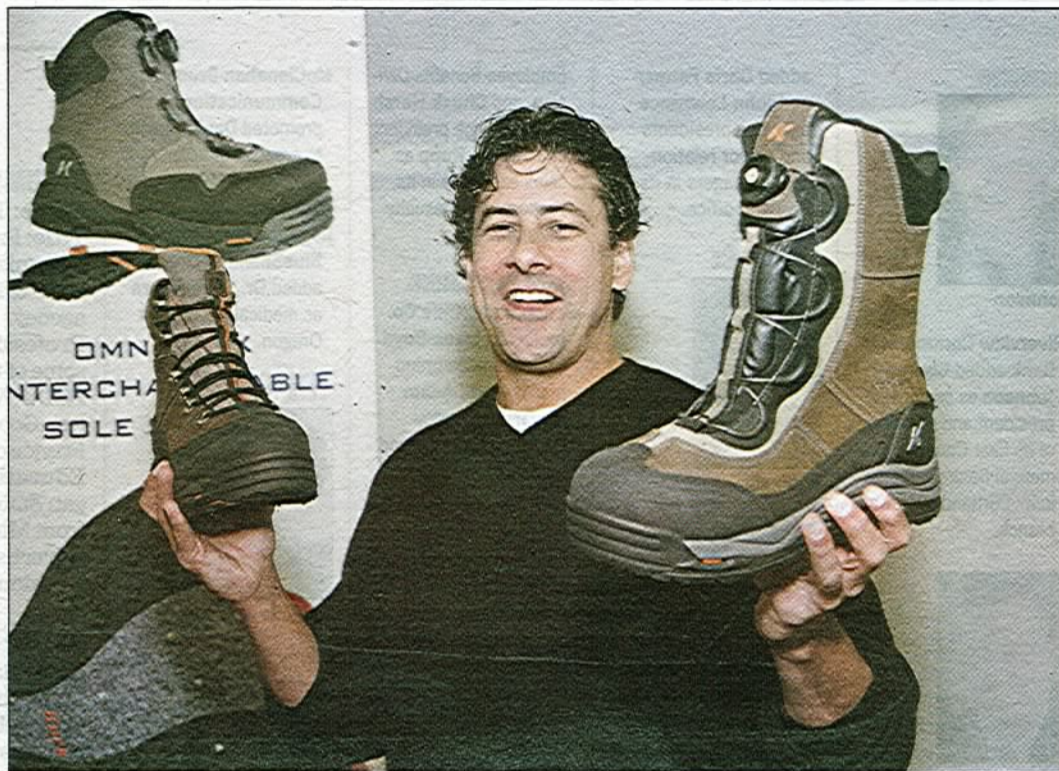
Throughout most of the brand’s early years, Korkers’ products served more as accessories than footwear — a sort-of rudimentary sandal with spiked soles that strapped on boots.

It wasn’t until the last decade that the company began tinkering with the concept of adaptable traction.

Earlier versions of the concept featured an interchangeable sole that was strapped to a loop at the back of the shoe. A more recent iteration required a special tool to swap-out soles.

The technology has gained acceptance.

Korkers revenue this year will grow from \$1.9 million to \$2.4 million, with 80 percent of sales coming from the 250 specialty fly fishing retailers that carry the brand.



CATHY CHENEY | PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

Former Columbia Sportswear executive and Korkers CEO Sean Beers wants to gain traction in the growing market for outdoor footwear. Beers expects Korkers’ annual sales to climb from \$2.4 million to at least \$8 million by 2014.

KORKERS INC.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE:

Sean Beers.

WHAT WE DO:

Outdoor footwear company that originally specialized in shoes for fly fishing.

LOCATION:

Available locally at fishing retailers such as Great American Tackle Shop in Clackamas.

CONTACT:

1239 S.E. 12th Ave., Portland. 503-723-7100. On the Web at www.korkers.com.

Now Korkers, under Director of Product Creation Matt Martin, has refined the technology even further with an eye on reaching a broader market.

Branded “OmniTrax,” the latest adaptable traction upgrade allows the wearer for the first time to swap out soles without taking off the boots.

Instead, the soles slide into a groove and snap into place. A strap on the end of each interchangeable sole attaches to the back of the boot for additional support.

The first products using the new technology are expected to hit specialty shops this month.

But the big change for the company will come with its assault on the larger outdoor footwear market.

Metaphorically-speaking, Korkers is moving from a pond to an ocean.

U.S. sales for all fly fishing gear reached just \$658 million in 2007, the most recent data available, said Randi Swisher, president of the Denver-

based American Fly Fishing Trade Association.

And it’s not a figure that appears to be growing.

The outdoor footwear market last year, however, reached \$2 billion, said Matt Powell, a footwear analyst with industry research firm SportsOneSource.

In addition to being significantly larger, the outdoor market’s consumers are driven more by performance than brand loyalty, which spells opportunity for emerging brands.

“The sportsman’s market is always looking for interesting new ideas, new takes on things,” Powell said. “They’re willing to try out a fair amount of new equipment.”

Korkers is banking on it.

The company expects sales to climb to at least \$8 million in 2014, an exceptionally conservative estimate, according to Beers.

More than half of those sales would come through outdoor retailers, up from just \$171,000 this year.

The company’s fall and winter product lines will begin shipping late next summer and it’s already generating some buzz with retailers.

One major outdoor retailer the company declined to identify has agreed to an initial 40-store trial — a victory even by large-company standards, said Martin, who joined Korkers last year after long stints with Columbia and Adidas.

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