

Lee Cooperman, owner of D&L Apparel Ltd., goes out of his way to accommodate customers that run small stores. Having started his business in the second bedroom of his Chicago apartment in 1985, he fully understands what it's like being a small business owner and likes to help out the smaller stores. While D&L Apparel has grown quite a bit since 1985, Lee is still very hands on with all facets of his operation that specializes in men's sportswear, men's accessories, and women's apparel.

"A lot of companies may have large pre-packs. Because where he started out, he likes to help out the smaller customer, so we break things down into small pre-packs to allow those people to bring in the name brand merchandise we have," said Brandon Cooperman, Lee's son and colleague at D&L Apparel. "They find that to be pretty helpful. Some customers, if you try selling them 48 pieces of one item, they automatically say, 'Oh no, I'm not that big, I can't take that.'"

Lee's worked hard over the years to source quality, brand name items. It's something he learned from his first job in the jobbing world and remained important to him. He's excelled at it as several of the brands he represented prior to starting D&L Apparel Ltd. are still with him to this day.

"We pride ourselves in a couple of different things," said Lee. "Fast delivery, we try to service the account within 24 hours and have the goods out our door the same day. We protect the customer. Dealing with the irregulars, if they have problems, we back up that problem, because we want the customer to be able to survive. I started out small and I understand what small business is."

More than 29 years after starting D&L Apparel Ltd. in the second bedroom of his apartment, Lee's still helping out across all levels of the company.

"He's still in the warehouse, he's at his desk, back and forth to the warehouse. If someone's not here he's packing up boxes, calling, still doing everything that he did when he started out," added Brandon.

"The valet service in my apartment building did not like me. Sometimes he had to receive 20 or 30 boxes," said Lee.

Clean cut beginnings

Before Lee was able to open his own company, he cut his teeth in the retail industry in St. Louis, Mo. The person he worked for in St. Louis tried expanding too rapidly and closed up shop after only three years. That turned out to be a blessing because Lee is Chicago born and raised, and he welcomed the chance to return home.

He ended up finding a job as the manager of a retail store in Chicago. In a story befitting of the times in the 1970s, ownership of the store deemed him too clean cut.

"They were looking for more of a hippie type manager with long hair, plaid pants, floral shirt. I was clean-cut from the military. I ended up getting a job from the guys brother, who owned a wholesale company.



He gave me three days to pack up in St. Louis. I went back on a Friday, and I was back here packed up on Sunday in Chicago, and started working for him on a Monday," recalls Lee.

Lee stayed with the wholesale company, Unity Garment, for 11 years (1974 – 1985), running the company for the majority of that time span. When the owner decided to close the business, Lee liquidated down to nothing and quickly opened his own business, and D&L Apparel Ltd. was born.

Lee dealt with branded goods at Unity Garment and upon opening D&L Apparel, started to re-acquire clothing lines he rep'd prior to the company closing.

"Some of the companies stayed with me even though I was working on my own," added Lee.

Brand Name Goods

Lee's experience in branded apparel suited him well then, and it suits him well now. "I stayed in my apartment selling for about six months, then actually took over a (larger) space. That's when I started going back to the major companies I dealt with before."

Lee continues:

"As I grew in those days, we moved into a new warehouse, which was about 2,000 square feet. I stayed in that old warehouse for two years, outgrew it, moved into a new warehouse, 5,000 square feet, it was more than double the size, continued to grow to the location that we're in now, and continued looking for name brand products."

Back then and today, Lee has carried an impressive array of brand name clothing and accessories. Two of the most well known names he carried upon starting out were Coca-Cola Clothing company, and Levi Strauss. Today, D&L carries about five different lines of shirts, as well as an array of denim brands.

But D&L's product catalog doesn't stop at men's shirts. It also carries an impressive collection of men's sportswear, covering such categories as jeans, and jackets in addition to shirts. D&L also carries



Vendor Profile **D&L Apparel**

women's and accessories such as leather belts and ties.

"In today's market, there has been a softness in the marketplace on denims. But I believe that the United States is a denim country so we try to excel in that area," said Lee.

Brandon estimates that brand names account for 90% of D&L's inventory.

"We strive for name brand products because that is actually a product that is hard for the off-price consumer, the retail store, to purchase at a discounted price because a single store can't buy the quantity. So we go in and buy larger quantities...moderately large quantities to continue distributing name brand products," explains Lee.

It's become increasingly more difficult for jobbers to acquire name brand goods due to a shift in the mentality of the brands themselves.

"What happened with these companies, they started disliking secondary distribution of their products because they lose control of distribution. A lot of these companies would rather ship it to third world countries instead of having a secondary market in the United States. It's very difficult to get name brand goods," said Lee.

D&L Apparel has a sterling reputation with hundreds of brands, earned from years of conducting good business so a stop into their booth at OFFPRICE is a must for all retailers seeking such products. The proof is evident when you see recognizable and established brands in D&L's booth at OFFPRICE because they are a trusted company. Lee's been handling a few major brands for 45 years now, predating his time at D&L, all the way back to when he was with Unity Garment. They gave him a chance and suffice it to say, he's earned their trust by continuing to handle their goods today.

"The main issue we run into with picking up new brands, is convincing presidents of companies that we're honest, and trusting that we'll protect the name and not throw 1,000 units out to someone right next to one of their full retail stores," said Brandon. "We actually protect the label and we'll refrain from shipping, let's say, vulnerable areas of distribution of the license holder."

A True Family Business

When Brandon completed his degree in business marketing from Western Michigan University in 2010, he started to help out with the jobbing business his dad owned while he looked for other employment. But that part-time work eventually led into a full-time position and he's been a tremendous addition to the company.

As Lee remembers it, chuckling: "The bottom line was, after a year and a half out of school, I said, "Either get a job, or you're working for me."

"Even though my son is with me now and has helped out tremendously in the growth of the business in the last two years, he's only been in it 4 years. But in business itself, if you ever think you know everything, you'll be out of business. I'm still learning after 45 years. As Brandon goes, he learns something everyday," added Lee.

D&L is a very liquid company. This helps them immensely. "Not being a massive company, we can turn our warehouse around within a couple of months to acquire new looks and new trends in the marketplace," said Lee.

Jobbing in Chicago

Being a jobbing company based in the Midwestern metropolis of Chicago puts D&L Apparel in the minority of exhibiting OFFPRICE companies that are not headquartered in the fashion hubs of Los Angeles or New York City. Of course that provides the company with some distinct advantages.

"One pro that comes to mind, is that we're centralized, so it's easy for us to travel. Also with shipping, we're in the middle," said Brandon.

Booth #1130

When you're walking the show floor at the OFFPRICE Show in February, make it a priority to frequent D & L's booth (#1130) to see for yourself the apparel and accessories they have available. It very well could be in booth 1130 that you'll find your next hot selling shirt, jeans, or leather belt.

"We put a tremendous amount of work into our booth. We put a lot of work into our display. We pride ourselves in the product that we handle, carry, and distribute," concludes Lee.

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