INNOVATORS: YVON CHOUINARD

Modest and charming, but always inventive and entrepreneurial, Yvon Chouinard says he never wanted to be a business man, but the founder of outdoor brand Patagonia is widely recognised as a pioneer in supply chain transparency, in green business and in giving back. Now Mr Chouinard wants us all to live simpler lives and to stop consuming for the sake of it, only buying things if we really need them, including things from Patagonia.

Social climber

Black Friday, the day after the US Thanksgiving holiday, is a relatively new phenomenon but, each year since 2005, it has been the busiest shopping day of the year in the country and is now a major focus for advertising. Yvon Chouinard, the founder of outdoor brand Patagonia, likes to talk about Black Friday 2011, when his company ran a full-page advertisement in the New York Times, showing a picture of a blue Patagonia fleece jacket with a statement urging shoppers not to buy it. "Unfortunately, the jacket in the *New York Times* sold more than you would believe," he says. Unfortunately. What kind of business person says it's unfortunate that his product has sold well? "Well, I never wanted to be a business man," is Yvon Chouinard's answer.

Mountain man

An avid climber, he spent his teens and early 20s bouldering in Yosemite National park, and in Canada and the Alps in warmer months. In the late 1950s, the only pitons available were ones that embedded permanently in the rock; seeking a more practical and cheaper way, Mr Chouinard bought an anvil and forge and set about creating reusable pitons from chrome-molybdenum steel. Word spread and demand grew, and with the help of aeronautical engineer and investor Tom Frost, Chouinard Equipment was born. By 1970, the company had become the largest supplier of climbing hardware in the US. However, the damage caused to rocks by pitons was becoming increasingly evident and so the pair sought a better design.



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They switched to aluminium chocks, and although it was a risk, the idea – and the philosophy of protecting the environment – caught on.

A trip to Scotland, and a colourful souvenir rugby shirt, provided the inspiration for a move into apparel and the business was renamed Patagonia. Decades of growth followed, as did a focus on new materials. Yvon Chouinard realised that advances could be made by testing and developing products in the field and collaborating with mills and textile specialists to create better products.

In the mid-1990s, the world was alerted to the 'sweatshop' conditions in some apparel factories around the world, and Patagonia became part of a movement to make supply chains more transparent and conditions safer and fairer. After helping to launch non-profit groups the Fair Labor Association and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, the company embarked on a still-evolving corporate social responsibility strategy, with 100% of supplier factories now audited and all raw materials approved by certification bureau bluesign. The company then decided to donate 1% of sales, or 10% of profits, whichever was the greater, to helping small, local environmental programmes. The company has now given $40 million in grants and in-kind donations to grassroots environmental organisations, seeking "to protect wilderness for the sake of wilderness". Patagonia's forward-thinking is also evident in its use of materials, especially its penchant for recycled and recyclable polyester, organic cotton, hemp, Tencel, plant-based rubber and merino from Patagonia-based farmers, that's Patagonia in Argentina, of course.

A simple life

Perhaps part of the appeal of remote Patagonia is that life seems simpler there. "I think living more simply is a trend," Mr Chouinard says. "Right now we are using up the resources of 1.5 planets and, at this rate, in 35 years, it will be between three and five planets' worth. That's hardly sustainable. A world economy based on consuming and destroying natural resources is bound to crash. We know we can't have growth for ever and if we all cut back on consumption the economy is going to crash. But it's going to crash anyway because it's so unsustainable." Laughing, he says he doesn't have an answer to this conundrum, but says he has a feeling that "a responsible economy" has to be based on simplicity.

He says this was the real message behind the the full-page advertisement. Patagonia wanted people to buy the jacket only if they decided, after careful consideration, that they really needed it. It wanted them to buy only one jacket, one that would work for skiing, for fishing and in the city on top of a suit. It wants its jackets to last and for people to pass them on when they have grown out of them or grown tired of the colour, for none of its products to go into landfill, or even occupy space in a closet for months on end. "If you have to buy one, make it one that will last," Yvon Chouinard says. "And we promise to make it responsibly, to repair if it goes wrong and take ownership back from you to help you sell it or recycle it into a new product."



Patagonia's new Nano Air jacket offers four-way stretch and breathability. But do we really need it?

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The process of business

Making things responsibly means outsourcing production to partners in China, chosen on merit because that's where the highest-quality sewing skills are to be found, the Patagonia founder insists. He also believes that it's important for the company to keep hiring people with independent spirits, even though a psychologist once told him Patagonia employees were so independently minded they would be unemployable anywhere else. "We still get 900 applicants for every position," he explains, "so in the end I ask myself if I'd like to have dinner with a person, and if the answer is no, they don't get hired. Don't forget, I never wanted to be a business man, so I figure I might as well work with people who are my friends."

All of this is part of what he calls getting the business process right, believing that if you get the process right, success will follow. "If you ask me what our profit is going to be this year, I don't know," he says. "I forgot. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in the process of business. I learned this from climbing. Sometimes you spend ages climbing and when you get to the top, there's nothing there; it's all flat. So, what's important is how you climb, and that applies to business too."

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