BRAND PROFILE: MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT

From humble beginnings, the UK brand has supplied insulated jackets and sleeping bags to every British-first ascent of an 8,000m peak, has been part of more than 175 Everest summits and equipped unsupported trips to the North and South Poles.

Scaling new heights

In a reversal of usual market strategy, Mountain Equipment's growth was almost accidental. Peter Hutchinson and Peter Crew were part of a small group of dedicated climbers in the north of England; when their Manchester-based gear shop closed in the early 1960s – "everyone who came in, we knew, so we never made any profit," says Hutchinson – they discovered a knack for making their own sleeping bags, and set up a workshop in a small shed in Cheshire to supply to their friends.

The UK climbing community was relatively small at the time, and they were called on to create light, warm bags that would provide the climbers with the means to venture further, and higher. Mountaineer Doug Scott, who completed the first ascent of the south-west face of Mount Everest in 1975, remembers what he describes as the pair's "down empire". "We would say, I want a sleeping bag but I don't want it to weigh more than one-and-a-half pounds and I want it to keep me warm in minus 20."

Local retailers got word, requested products, and the business grew. These new products, among others, helped "open the world" to the climbers at the time. "Things that had seemed impossible before were there to be taken; expanding to the Alps, then to further ranges, the Andes and the Himalayas," adds Mr Scott.

The close connection with climbers has been the heartbeat of the company ever since: the brand doesn't just sponsor expeditions, it enables them. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, it supplied to the first ascent of the east face of Mount Chephren in Canada, to British expeditions in the Andes and the Central Tower of Paine in Patagonia.

Working with climber Don Whillans, Hutchinson created the company's first synthetic duvet jacket, Cerro Torre, in 1970 and the first down suit for an expedition to India's Annapurna. Everest expeditions followed with early users including Chris Bonnington, Hamish MacInnes and Rab Carrington – who would go on to launch outdoor brand Rab, now part of the same group. Sales rocketed – reportedly increasing 60% year on year. By the mid-1980s the company's products had been used on 10 Everest expeditions, as well as by legendary explorer Ranulph Fiennes for the first circumnavigation of the world via the Poles.



Mountaineers and rock climbers rely on Mountain Equipment's lightweight but technical products.

Mountain Equipment/Lukasz Warzecha

Global growth

Technologies such as Gore-Tex and synthetic insulator Hollofill enabled Mountain Equipment to branch from its mainstay of insulated jackets and sleeping bags into lightweight jackets,


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The feather in the cap

Down traceability has been one of the most talked-about issues in the outdoor industry over the past year or so, with Patagonia and The North Face (TNF) both promoting the work they've done to look at where the feathers come from, following a report by German animal rights group Four Paws in 2010 suggesting that some was originating from force-fed and live-plucked geese. At the start of this year, TNF 'gifted' its research to the Textile Exchange (TE) to share with the rest of the industry.

However, Mountain Equipment claims to be one of the first in the sector to address these issues, launching its Codex project five years ago. "In 2008, we were having in-house conversations about ethical animal welfare. We always put a lot of thought into the end use and the end user, but that's a world away from living conditions for animals or social conditions in factories," says Richard Talbot, director of product.

"We were relatively alone – there was no one in the down industry who had any experience of it and even the people we ended up working with for our auditing didn't have any experience of these supply chains. We've learnt a huge amount in the past five years about how supply chains work, how they vary from country to country, region to region, and just how complicated down sourcing is."

Globally, half the down (51%) used by outdoor brands comes from duck and the remainder from geese, according to the European Outdoor Group. But while duck down is overwhelmingly sourced from China (90%), goose down has a more even distribution: 49% is from China, 24% is from Hungary, 9% is from the Ukraine while Poland and Romania produce 5% each. Mountain Equipment sources about 70% from Asia, mainly China, and the rest from Europe.

"One thing we've learnt is we're not dealing with big organisations – you're dealing with tiny farms with maybe five or 10 ducks or geese – and that's how a large proportion is farmed."

The company engaged the Zurich-based International Down and Feather Lab to initiate the process and two supply chains (70% of volume) have since been audited at least once. Every product except for two in its autumn-winter 2014 range has been through the process (one is being phased out and the other is being integrated into an approved supply chain).

"One of the problems we had originally was with wholesalers who were hesitant about revealing their sources – not because they're trying to hide things, they were worried we were going to go direct to the farms. There was a huge amount of trust required."



The Codex project is now in its fifth year of mapping down supply chains.
Mountain Equipment

The company reduced its supply chain by about 30%, with one chain phased out and another placed in 'corrective measures'. "It's important to stress we're not trying to make our suppliers trip up and fail, we're trying to make them improve. Often the things that get flagged are as simple as documentation and paper trail."

Customers can now find a Codex label with a 12-digit code which, when punched into the website, gives a general overview of the type of farming and practises and an audit report from the batch, with the cost of the project, "tens of thousands of euros annually", taken from the company's marketing budget.

"We've almost done it in reverse to other brands. We started with a different mind-set: let's just get on the ground and find out what's going on; we'll worry about a framework or a standard after that."

TNF's Responsible Down Standard, now run by the TE, is undergoing a "rapid revision process"; Mr Talbot thinks it is too complex, prohibitively expensive and impractical as it stands. "Certain brands may be able to do it – perhaps TNF will be able to make it work, but time will tell. They're just starting that process, we've been in it for five years."

The next steps are revising its own audits, adding questions and complexity. "With projects like this, there's a starting point, but I'm not that sure there ever is an end point," he adds. "It's a journey."

waterproof coats and Ultrafleece. It outgrew its base and expanded again, but Mr Hutchinson was by then feeling the pressure of success. "I never really wanted it to get so big – all I wanted to do was make things, but all of a sudden you're a business man – it all becomes so remote," he says of those years.

The company was bought by the Peaco group in 1991 which allowed it to restructure and Mr Hutchinson to step away and launch a smaller operation, PHD. Mountain Equipment was subsequently bought by Outdoor & Sports Company in 1997 and by current owner The Bollin Group in 2002. It now operates from three main hubs: the UK, Germany and most recently the US, and has licensee operations in Japan and Korea. However, Europe and the US remain the core focus, with well-established outdoor markets and a large pool of end-users.

"We can name numerous great products we have developed over the years but for every one of those there are probably two or three great stories of a new route or expedition first that have been accomplished in part by using

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Sheltering inside a snow cave, jackets and bags are sufficient to protect climbers from the elements.

Mountain Equipment/ Ole Marius Elvestad

those products as a direct result of having sponsored athletes," says Richard Talbot, Mountain Equipment's head of product, on the reason for the brand's marketing focus on the climbers.

"That remains as relevant now as it has been throughout the 50-odd years we've been in existence, except for the fact that those stories are now in real-time. With our Facebook and Twitter feeds people can connect with wild places and immerse themselves in adventurous activities even if they're on their daily commute or living in a city with only occasional trips to the mountains."

Delicate landscapes

The company has now been part of more than 175 Everest summits, and protecting these landscapes is also a priority. "You don't have to travel very far to realise the environments we all cherish as well as the communities that are found within them are under all sorts of pressures – partly as a result of more people visiting," adds Mr Talbot. "As a manufacturer of outdoor products we play a part in that and while we cannot change the world we can support organisations that are making a real difference in regions and in environments that Mountain Equipment has a real affinity with."

It invests in Community Action Nepal, which supports Himalayan communities – "without whom, many of the expeditions we've been associated with would not have happened" – and the John Muir Trust, which is working to protect wild places in the UK.

"More recently, our association with the European Outdoor Conservation Association has extended that commitment, nominating practical projects in Snowdonia and in supporting the organisation on a wider level with its projects throughout Europe and further afield," adds Mr Talbot.

Snowdonia is a home-from-home for the company, with its products tested in the Welsh mountains through its sponsorship of Plas-y-Brenin, the National Mountain Centre for the UK. It also supplies apparel and sleeping bags to the DAV Expedition Team, which trains young Alpinists in Germany. Feedback from the climbers is integrated directly into product development. "We are proud to support the DAV as they advance these young, enthusiastic and exceptionally talented alpinists," the company states.

Mountain Equipment enthusiast and mountaineer Reinhold Messner, who was the first to scale Everest without bottled oxygen, sums up the sentiment in a video commissioned for the brand's 50th anniversary in 2012: "Each generation has the chance to reinvent climbing – you have to find new approaches, and there is still everything there to reinvent."



The Zero range features the lightest and most compressible bags and are the best choice for Alpinists and backpackers. Made with high-quality goose down and fabric that weighs 30g/sq metre, the bag is designed with a neck collar to stop warm air escaping and a draft tube behind the zip. The newly developed Alpine Fit uses a reprofiled down distribution to optimise thermal efficiency and minimise weight and bulk.

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