# Going the Distance: Sierra Designs uses creative software tools to streamline it's Designs & Development process

"We have the same number of people on our design team today that we did in 1993. That year, we might have created 10 new designs. Last year, we created an average of 63 per season."

Woody Blackford
Director of Outerwear Design and Development
Sierra Designs Canada
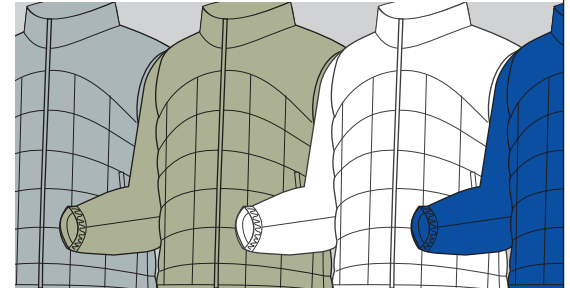
SPOTLIGHT

Sierra Designs Canada
www.sierra-designs.com

CHALLENGE

To streamline the apparel-design process from initial conception through manufacturing

SOLUTION

CorelDRAW® Graphics Suite

BENEFITS

CorelDRAW's versatility and flexibility provide greater design freedom and improve ability to communicate with manufacturers for faster, more accurate production

The Story

Sierra Designs got its start in San Fransisco in 1965 as a manufacturer of outdoor equipment and personal apparel. Sierra Designs Canada was founded in 1982 as an exclusive Canadian licensee of the brand. Currently based in Brampton Ontario, the company also operates a manufacturing facility in Foymount, Ontario.

"The business has changed a lot over the years," remarks Woody Blackford, Director of Outerwear Design and Development at Sierra Designs Canada. "Outdoor apparel used to be pretty utilitarian and mostly for men, with a few unisex garments tossed into the mix. Now it's about 50-50 men's and women's. While our clothes still need to be functional, these days they have to be fashionable, too. That's where the fun comes in."

The Challenge

The evolution of the outdoor-apparel industry and the corporate success of Sierra Designs have both produced challenges for the company. Fashion-savvy consumers and an increasingly competitive marketplace demand increasingly greater flexibility and creativity from the Sierra Designs team—not to mention an ever-wider selection of clothing.

At the same time, the company deals with some of

the most powerful retail partners in the world: corporations that expect nothing short of the absolute best in terms of quality and on-time delivery. And, in addition to its domestic manufacturing facility, Sierra Designs' apparel division depends on partnerships with contract manufacturers overseas in Asia.

Design, for the Sierra team, has therefore become a complex process in which clear communication at every stage is critical to success. CorelDRAW has helped Blackford and his colleagues achieve that clarity in a number of surprisingly powerful ways.

The Solution

"I used CorelDRAW from the first release," says Blackford, "designing T-shirts back in university. Even then, the preview capability was crucial: you could show people what you were doing and make changes in real time."

When Blackford joined Sierra Designs in 1993, the company was already using CorelDRAW. Over the years, as its design requirements evolved, CorelDRAW evolved along with them.

"CorelDRAW has never held us back," observes Blackford. "It's grown with us, with the technologies we use."

A case in point is CorelDRAW's handling of color. In the

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"CorelDRAW lets us work without limits. I can't imagine what we'd do without it."

early days, Sierra Designs tended to stick within a basic pallet of reds and blues: no more. The interoperability of CorelDRAW allows Blackford and his colleagues to add plug-ins such as Pantone color queues to increase their options. While output devices often introduce variances, CorelDRAW has the flexibility to make adjustments easily.

Perhaps the greatest advantage Sierra Designs has gained by using CorelDRAW, however, has to do with the specification packages it creates to support the manufacturing process.

From concept to creation

At the beginning of each new design season, Sierra Designs uses CorelDRAW to map out its plans.

"We identify all the different kinds of garments and styles we'll need and build these into a single, at-a-glance map," explains Blackford. "Over time, we fill the map in with images of the actual designs we're working on."

He observes that a key advantage of CorelDRAW is its ability to preserve the entire trail of iterations and maintain a complete record of the evolution of each design.

Sierra Designs selects winning options from many designs proposed; these are adapted from thumbnails into detailed sketches that can be shipped out for prototyping.

"What we actually send," says Blackford, "is a 17-page spec package of graphic designs, technical drawings, measurements, instructions—all created using CorelDRAW. Anything we want to include, we're able to include."

This package becomes the vehicle for all communi-cation going forward. When prototypes are received, Blackford and his colleagues take digital pictures of various elements, import them into CorelDRAW, and make comments electronically-inserting textual instructions (and visual manipulations) overtop of the images. Essentially, they're able to annotate the prototype and return comments to the manufacturer in real time.

It's a long way from the not-so-old days of marking garments with chalk and shipping them back to the factory by courier.

The Benefits

The renderings that Blackford and his team create in CorelDRAW are so detailed and of such high quality that they actually reduce the number of iterations required to create a finished garment. That amounts to an important time- and cost-saving gain in efficiency.

At the same time—according to Sierra Designs' Vice-president of Operations, Dennis Koop—the ability to build comprehensive spec packages is invaluable when working with manufacturers on the other side of the world.

"It cuts through the language barrier," says Koop, "by allowing you to communicate in both pictures and words. It accelerates your process; you can be clearer in your instructions. There's less need to go back and forth with questions. When you're separated by a 12-hour time difference, that's extremely helpful."

Koop estimates that, in the prototyping process alone, CorelDRAW cuts the time it takes to progress from one iteration to the next by 20 to 25 percent. He notes with a smile that, in the past, designers' comments would often be met with questions. Today, he routinely receives emails from manufacturers stating, simply: "All is very clear. Thank you."

A final benefit Sierra Designs gains by using CorelDRAW has to do with the reusability of graphics. Extremely portable, CorelDRAW files can be converted into other formats. As a result, images used in the design process may end up on the website, for example, or in a season's promotional workbooks.

Woody Blackford sums up the advantages succinctly, saying: "CorelDRAW lets us work without limits. I can't imagine what we'd do without it."
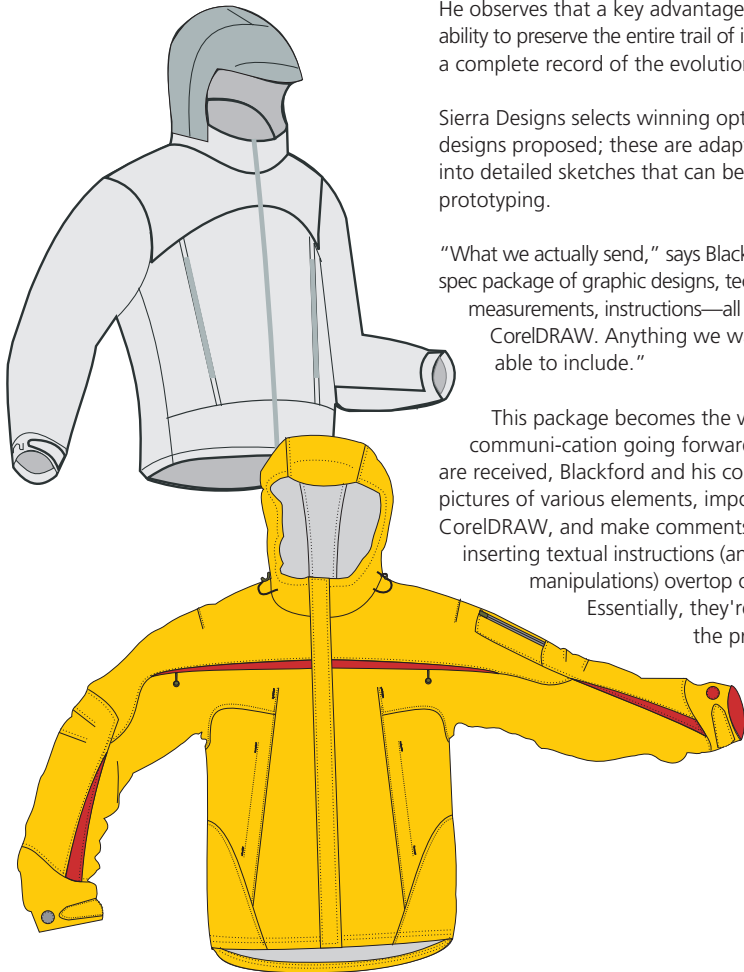
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