

A Conundrum Everywhere



"There's no comparison of products manufactured offshore to items manufactured by people who know horses, riders and their needs."

Gina Campbell — Ride N Drive Horse Supplies, Alberta

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Warren Gunn — SilverWolf Canada in Manitoba

"Don't complain about the Chinese; use them as your driving inspiration to change what you do."

Peter Wilkes — Vale Brothers Ltd., Walsall

Retailers and manufacturers in far-flung corners of the globe wrestle with the same issues their American counterparts do when it comes to wanting to be loyal to their country, manufacture at home or purchase home-grown products.

"It strikes me as quite odd that the theme of the cowboy, a culture born, raised and nurtured in the wild West of Canada and the United States, is a theme whose product is now being manufactured in Asia and parts of the world that have no cowboy history or tradition," said Warren Gunn, director of marketing for SilverWolf Canada in Manitoba. "Manufacturers who have prospered from the cowboy theme owe it to their retailers, and in particular to the history of the cowboy culture, to make sure that not only are their designs authentic, but that they're manufacture takes place in a geographical region that is historically a part of the culture—namely, the West."

Gunn says he understands the plight of clothing manufacturers to a degree, but says there's no excuse for the rest of the Western sector not to be supporting the nations of its birth.

Retailers in Canada say their customers definitely prefer Canadian-made products. "I try hard to carry Canadian-made items where available and where the price is affordable," said Gina Campbell of Ride N Drive Horse Supplies in Alberta.

She buys from local manufacturers, where possible.

Gregory and Catherine Smith, owners of The Leathersmiths in Ontario, Canada, said they purchase as much as they can from neighbors in their town, then look at businesses in the same province and in Canada before turning to the United States.

"I would do business with my neighbors no matter where I lived," Gregory Smith said.

In New Zealand, locally made is a "big deal," according to Pamela Tapp, owner of Horse Crazy, a retail operation.

"Nothing makes me more angry than to buy something I think has been made in New Zealand and then get it home to find it has been made in China and exported by a company with a New Zealand address," Tapp said. "To me, that is false advertising, and I would not purchase off that person again."

The discussion about foreign-made products is often ferocious in the United Kingdom, as well.

"Our retailers, wholesalers and manufacturers are in the same position as those in the United States: high labor costs and competition from around the corner and around the globe," said Peter Wilkes of Vale Brothers Ltd. Equerry Soft Touch Brushes in Walsall.

He advocates working cleverer, not harder.

"You can compete with China by offering wider ranges of colors, greater variety of product styles, shorter production runs, smaller minimum orders—sell the advantages of stock turn and cash flow," Wilkes said. "Design success into your products. Make them different in some way. Maybe the advantage is only for a year or two, but then change again."

He said Vale Brothers recently spent \$25,000 designing a new brush range, \$40,000 on injection tooling and \$400,000 on a machine to run the new products.

"Don't complain about the Chinese; use them as your driving inspiration to change what you do," Wilkes added. 