

The Western cowboy boot has a history as storied as that of the West itself. One of the oldest boot makers is Justin Boot Co., which was started back in 1879. Lucchese was established in 1883 in San Antonio by 20-year-old Sam Lucchese, just three years after arriving in the U.S. Tony Lama Boot Co. began in 1911. All three started up in Texas, where a new kind of boot was needed to help its wearers build ranches, herd cattle on horseback and tame the American West.

Those companies paved the way for many others over the last century. Durango has been around for nearly 45 years, and was acquired by Rocky Brands along with other EJ Footwear labels in 2005. The company was established in 1932, but has been making Rocky boots for just seven years. This year, its efforts are focused on re-branding Durango. It is one of several that offer specialized programs for retailers.

"We have an exciting program set to launch in the 2nd and 3rd quarters with in-store merchandising," said marketing manager Chris Lorenzo.

Justin offers a Digital Asset Management system that serves as a repository of footwear images, logos, marketing tools and trademarks.

"These can be downloaded to help the dealer create catalogs or print advertising," said Jamie Morgan, vice president of sales and marketing. "We also provide the dealer with advertising co-op and a wide array of point-of-sale material, as well as concept

shops and information centers."

"We inventory a great selection of point-of-sale materials and conduct in-store seminars to inform and educate the dealer's sales associates," said Mike Fuller, brand manager for Tony Lama, part of Justin Brands. "Most importantly, Tony Lama has made a huge inventory investment in order to provide the retailer quick delivery on proven styles."

Several companies have sprung up in just the past 15 years to rub elbows with the big boot makers.

"I started Liberty Boot Co. in 1993 with Yan Ferry, (now owner of Old Gringo Boots)," said Tony Bennattar, owner of Liberty. "I'd already been designing and manufacturing Cowboy Boots for eight years by then. I want to push the boundaries in design while using traditional materials and methods. For instance, our hand-carved leather toe boxes are a rarity in 2009." Bennattar is also a professional musician, and incorporates elements of the rock 'n roll world into his intricately crafted boots.

Although Ariat is a major player, and one of the best-know brands in its own right, it too has only been making boots since 1993.

"We continue to stay authentic to the Western lifestyle," said Shane Johnston, Western Product Manager. "We are riders making cowboy boots for riders—this makes it easy to understand what the

consumer wants." Johnston predicts that the Fall 2009 season will be a great one for Western boots within the industry as well as mainstream fashion. "I see the two merging into what I like to call Ranch-Glam," she said.

Los Altos Western Boots, which has been in business since 1993, tries to do its homework when it comes to serving the retailer. "We do various kinds of research all over the country to cater to our customers' customers, and we have many great customers all over the U.S., Canada and Europe," said owner Roger Silva.

Blackjack Boots' main market is overseas, and is the largest distributor of alligator boots in Japan. The company does a lot of custom work and uses mostly exotic skins to make its boots.

Perhaps one of the newest boot makers, with an impressive success story, is Corral Boot. Launched in 1999, Corral is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year with Othell Welch at the helm and designers Francisco Cuadra and Jose Hernandez by his side. It too offers services that help the retailer succeed.

"In a lot of our print ads, we list our customer locations," Welch said. "We have a great sales staff that will help out with new openings, special sales, etc. This year we are gearing up our POP items that we'll be sending out. I'm also working on a new program that will have someone training sales personnel in the stores."

Kickin' it!

Western boot makers kick it into high gear with great new styles, comfort technologies and support for retailers who sell their products.

By Barb Kastens, Editor

