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AT WORK WITH



Tamara Stenn
 Fair Trade Knitwear Entrepreneur
 Kusikuy Clothing Company

Inspired by her 1997 Peace Corps stint in Bolivia, Tamara Stenn started up Kusikuy Clothing Company - a fair trade knitwear retailer and wholesaler that specializes in Alpaca wool pieces made by indigenous Bolivians. Here, the entrepreneur talks with WWD correspondent Molly Fergus about fair-trade shopping and the recent popularity of socially conscious consumerism.

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WWD.COM: Why did you start Kusikuy?

Tamara Stenn: I was living in Bolivia as a rural journalist with the US Peace Corps when I started Kusikuy. I decided to attend Graduate School at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vt. I wanted to work in rural economic development internationally. I loved the alpaca sweaters and felt others would, too. I also knew that Vermont was cold. So I had 100 sweaters custom-knit with our own labels and sold them at the local flea market.

WWD.COM: How did you choose the name Kusikuy?

Tamara Stenn: Kusikuy is a Quechua word that means "Make yourself happy." The knitters are all indigenous women who speak Quechua, which is a 5,000-year-old Andean language. I liked Kusikuy because it is sort of symmetrical in its lettering, was short enough and had a great meaning.

WWD.COM: Kusikuy started as a home-based business and grew to become an international retailer and wholesaler. How quick was your growth, and what do you think drove your company's success?

Tamara Stenn: We've been growing at about 20 percent a year, but last year actually tripled. This came when we began attending national trade shows like Outdoor Retailer and "D&A" and began working with customers such as Timberland, Whole Foods and Gaiam, a mail-order natural-living catalog. Kusikuy is all about sustainability. I've seen other companies come into the Andean region with tremendous growth and burnout leaving knitters with no incomes and yarn unbought. We always want our products to be perfect and have a deep respect for the knitters and their traditional lifestyles.

WWD.COM: Green, organic and fair-trade products such as coffee have increased in popularity in the last few years. How has this affected your business?

Tamara Stenn: I have been working with organics since 1986 when I was in college and cooked at Beautiful Day, a small health-food store in Maryland. I started working with the organic fiber after first exploring the organic foods market from Bolivia. This was in 1996 and the organic food was already exploding. I saw fiber going the same way and chose to go that route. Kusikuy has now been working with organic fiber for 10 years.

WWD.COM: Where do you see the fair trade trend going in the next few years?

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Tamara Stenn: I see it following the trend of the organic industry. There will soon be more regulation, consolidation and continued growth. Myself and the Kusikuy staff personally worked with Brattleboro, Vt., the location of our USA headquarters, to get the entire town declared as the second Fair Trade Town in the USA. There are over 300 Fair Trade towns in Europe and many other towns are also looking to get this status in the USA. So it is a trend with unlimited outlets.

WWD.COM: How does the sale of one sweater or knit product help a knitter in Bolivia?

Tamara Stenn: Bolivia is the poorest country of the Americas. In May 2007 the Bolivia newspaper reported a 30 percent protein deficiency rate for children in the countryside. This affects the mental development of the children. I have been working with the knitters in Bolivia for 10 years. In this time I have seen their children grow up, go to school, graduate and move on to teaching college and the university. Even the girls graduate. Other non-knitting families have to take their children out of school so they can work. The Kusikuy knitters earn enough extra income that the children can study and go to college.

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