

Barnett on Business Travel: Ex-paratrooper jumps into tough world of travel bags

by *Chris_Barnett*

Long before he jumped into the travel bag business, Jim Markel packed parachutes during his four-year tour in the Marines. Rigging 'chutes wasn't going to be a career, but it had a powerful impact on his mind.

"The rigger's motto," he says, "is 'I will be sure - always.' It's a matter of life and death."

Markel has carried that mentality into a business with his dad, Jim Sr., called Red Oxx Manufacturing. They started off making fitness equipment for major brands but never controlled their own destiny.

"Every time we would ramp up enough volume, the brand would switch their production to China; we had to layoff all our people and look for another customer," Markel recalls.

In a town the size of Billings, Mont., where the Markels hail from, that kind of roller-coaster ride hurts everyone, especially the factory workers.

One day, he was hunting and tore his gear bag.

"I said to myself, 'this is a piece of junk. I can make something better that will last.'"

Markel knew his way around design, sewing machines and fabrics. Spotting an empty storefront, he figured this was a way out from being under the thumb of the fitness equipment industry titans. So, he rented it and opened a store; however, he needed some inventory.

Designing what he knew best, Markel made a parachute kit bag for \$50 that toted a lot of gear. He started peddling them at outdoor shows to hunters, fishermen, hikers and other recreational enthusiasts. He stuck with the catchy name - Red Oxx - and a logo that looks more like a lean longhorn steer rather than a thick ox.

Never forgetting the rigger's motto, he went for toughness rather than beauty in a bag. Word spread and customers found their way to his store.

In 1996, Markel made a gutsy move. He bailed out of the weight training world entirely. Instead, he dropped bags aimed exclusively at the hunting and fishing crowd, and zeroed in on travel bags exclusively for businesspeople on the go.

Riskier yet, while the luggage industry was putting wheels and a handle on almost anything that moved, Red Oxx carved out a niche in the "carry-on market," says the founder. And rather than shave costs and fatten profits by hiring a contract manufacturer in China, Markel made a vow that everything would be "made in Montana."

He's not a solo act, though, but he doesn't run with a herd either. He has a business partner named Perry Jones, who has the perfect DNA for the venture-Montana kid that never left except for 11 years with the Navy. Jones was also a parachute rigger and a flight equipment repairman with rescue skills who worked on pilot ejection seats.

Markel's wife Amanda, a former SkyWest Airlines flight attendant, is a charmer who "mans" the phones. From her days at 35,000 feet, she knows how to take care of customers.

"I'm so used to dealing with digitized voices and a long list of voice prompts," she said. "I was surprised to find a friendly, human voice that could answer questions and make things happen."

Red Oxx may be based in Billings, but it's been on the bleeding edge of Internet retailing. Markel designed and launched a creative Web site the same year he switched to travel bags. Today, visiting www.redoxx.com, is the only way you can buy a bag.

"We like to say," he smiles, "that we're not at a store near you."

This also saves them from hiring a squad of salespeople as well as trying to convince department store and travel goods buyers to take on another line.

Fast forward to 2007. Red Oxx has a line of handsomely designed and ruggedly-constructed bags and accessories in a dozen colors that don't silently shriek, "look at me." They're subtle and well thought out, similar to the Web site and the promotional material. The look is clean, isn't cluttered and is sophisticated without being snobbish. Madison Avenue ad agencies and branding consultancies couldn't do a better job.

The big seller is the Air Boss, a one-bag carry-on that's well suited for clothes and business equipment. Like

all Red Oxx bags, it is made exclusively from DuPont 1000 weight and Cordura nylon. The bag is roomy enough to carry a laptop, sport coat, slacks, casual clothes and files. Functional and attractive, it sells for \$225.

The Gator, with a claw shoulder strap, carries every business traveler's mobile office and all the digital gear that goes with it. A foam-padded section gives the bag structure. It can hold a computer and insulate it against shock for \$95.

The Red Oxx Flying Boxcar sounds exactly like it is - a large, boxy bag with outside zipper pockets that still fits in most airplane overhead compartments. However, if you're flying in those cramped, 50-person Canadair regional jets that feeder airlines and some of the majors operate, you're in trouble. These overheads are so small that you'll probably have to gatecheck it. Be sure to carry a laptop sleeve as a backup so you don't put your computer and your entire world at risk. The Boxcar is \$165.

The product line is rife with intelligent thinking; you don't see the same boring bag designs. The Safari Shave Kits is Markel and Jones' take on a military-style bag with side pockets. It is an astonishing bargain for \$25, considering the workmanship and quality-control that is hard to duplicate in an overseas factory. There's also a tri-fold toiletry kit for \$75 in any of the 12 colors.

Two other bags are distinctly Red Oxx. I haven't seen them in any other luggage line. One, the PR5.5 Safari Beano, can handle 50 pounds, the current maximum weight for airlines' domestic flights. The PR6 can take up to 70 pounds, the top weight on an international flight. Outdoor Magazine, no pushover, test drove the Safari Beano in 2004 and gave it a 'Gear of the Year' accolade. The price of the bag starts at \$165.

True to their military roots, Markel and Jones make a Rucksack modeled after the backpack World War II paratroopers used to carry their survival gear. A dull olive-green color makes it look authentic; however, Red Oxx added a couple outside pockets, perfect for an iPod or anything you need to survive on the road today. The cost is between \$200 and \$225.

Other than Briggs and Riley, Red Oxx is the only luggage line I know of that comes with an unconditional lifetime guarantee. If it breaks, they'll fix it or replace it.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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