

Jack Erwin's Sullivan and Foster collections use Goodyear welt and Blake construction techniques.

CREDIT: JACK ERWIN



Manhattan-based shoe start-up Jack Erwin appears to have had a remarkable first full year in business in 2014, cementing its reputation as a provider of affordable, high-class, handmade shoes for men and attracting investment from one of the biggest names in the global footwear industry. The design of its three collections takes place in New York, but the company has found its ideal manufacturing partners on the other side of the Atlantic.

New York brand turns to Spain for supply of handmade shoes

Last year, 2014, was momentous in the admittedly young life of New York men's footwear brand Jack Erwin. In September, the start-up, which specialises in offering high-quality handmade boots, brogues and loafers, announced that a major name in the global footwear industry, Brown Shoe Company, had taken a stake. Brown Shoe chief executive, Diane Sullivan, said at the time that her company had identified Jack Erwin as "a great incubator brand". She said Jack Erwin had high growth potential and "an interesting, new business model".

It conducts almost all of its business online and only ships to the 48 contiguous states of the US (the whole of the US except Hawaii and Alaska). In addition, it opened a new fitting room in November in the Manhattan neighbourhood of Tribeca, which customers can visit to ascertain their size and choose styles, with the company then shipping the finished shoes to the customer's home, just as it does for non-NYC customers whose only access is through the website. The company believes the fitting room idea will have an important impact; it's a consumer-facing initiative and the direct-to-consumer space is the only one in which Jack Erwin wants to operate. Founders, Lane Gerson and Ariel Nelson, have shown, according to Diane Sullivan, "an unwavering commitment to quality and detail and represent the next generation of business in our industry".

Luxury for less

For his part, Ariel Nelson said at the time of the announcement that investment from Brown Shoe will provide the new company with the chance to build up the

Jack Erwin brand and business model "using the knowledge and expertise of a respected industry leader". He and Lane Gerson started Jack Erwin in 2013, setting themselves the goal of providing luxury, handmade men's shoes for under \$200. It currently has three collections: Sullivan, Foster and



Access to quality materials and traditional artisan skills attracted Jack Erwin to manufacturers in Spain.

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Wright. Prices in the first two still start at \$195, while the summer suede loafers in the Wright collection are \$95. Sullivan and Foster are collections of dress shoes and boots, the former using Goodyear welt construction and the latter Blake construction. They are designed in New York, along very classical lines, but are handmade on the other side of the Atlantic, by artisan manufacturing partners in Spain.

The founders have said that they toured “dozens of factories” before choosing a small number of family-run footwear businesses in Spain as partners. Jack Erwin has described these suppliers as, typically, companies that have been in operation “for hundreds of years” and produce handmade men’s shoes using, at the footwear firm’s insistence, leather from tanneries in Italy and France. It says “generations of skilled artisans” work there and that these companies enjoy the additional advantage of proximity to “the finest raw materials in the world”, a reference to the leather.

Pan-European search

The company’s head of customer experience, Kiernan Heine, explains that, Jack Erwin had looked at factories “all across Europe” but found that the manufacturing partners in Spain it has chosen to work with were able to offer “the highest-quality shoes for the best price”. And he insists that it’s also because of this commitment to quality that the company continues to source its leather from tanneries in Italy and France. And all for \$200 per pair.

“Lane and Ariel, our two co-founders, realised that [as consumers and young business people] they had been priced out of the classic, amazing men’s shoes that they had grown up seeing on the feet of the men they respected and could not understand why these styles needed to cost a fortune,” Kiernan Heine says. “Through traditional retail channels, men have been flooded with options that are

either poorly made, over-designed, or prohibitively expensive. We plan to always offer a curated selection of shoes that are honestly-priced and made by hand to ensure the highest quality.”

Any name you like

Spanish footwear industry federation FICE made moves in 2014 to encourage this type of partnership with shoe manufacturers there. It even launched a new event called Co-Shoes, which took place in October in Elche, the country’s main footwear-producing area. The idea behind Co-Shoes is to help Spanish manufacturers link up with customers who want to source well made shoes from Spain and put their own brand names on them.

High-end Israeli footwear designer Kobi Levi said earlier in 2014 that he will launch a new “factory-friendly” collection in the near future, with Spanish manufacturers among the likely partners he will turn to. A much better known New York-based label, Stuart Weitzman, has made all of its shoes in Spain for decades. So Jack Erwin is far from alone in sourcing high quality shoes from family-run footwear businesses in that part of the world.

Similarly, Scarosso, a German-owned footwear brand specialising in handmade shoes, which started off selling online only, like Jack Erwin, but which has since opened a chain of own-brand boutiques, sources all of its shoes in Italy. Scarosso was founded in Milan in 2010, but by two German students, Moritz Offney and Marco Reiter, who met at the city’s Bocconi University. Another parallel with Jack Erwin is that Scarosso also aims to make high-quality handmade shoes available to its customers at affordable prices; its prices start at around €200 per pair.

For Spain and (in the case of Scarosso) Italy, this policy represents a bit of a change in direction. For years now FICE and its Italian counterpart Assocalzaturifici have been



Part of the attraction is easy access to high-quality leather from tanneries in France and Italy.

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Brown Shoe Company took a stake in Jack Erwin in 2014.

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encouraging their member companies to work hard on branding, to build up a portfolio of brands and expand those brand names into lucrative international markets such as China, Russia and, of course, the US. This policy has brought good levels of growth for many footwear groups in southern Europe, but for others, perhaps smaller manufacturers, the investment and effort involved in launching brands and promoting them around the world have proved too demanding. It's clear from FICE's 2014 Co-Shoes initiative and from the success Jack Erwin and the others have had in building up strong manufacturing partnerships that there are enough companies around who are content to concentrate on what they have always been best at, making high quality handmade shoes.

Growth curve, learning curve

Kiernan Heine believes that Brown Shoe's investment will allow Jack Erwin to take its time in creating "the sustainable company that we have always wanted to build". The start-up firm says it will use Brown Shoe as a constant point of reference as it continues along what it hopes will be a healthy growth curve. And even though Brown Shoe has a long and successful history in the global footwear sector, Heine says it has never made an investment like this before and that the experience ought also to provide Brown Shoe with a new experience and, possibly, an opportunity for it to learn something too. 📌



Founders Lane Gerson and Ariel Nelson set up Jack Erwin in 2013 because they believe traditionally handsome, hand-made shoes ought to be available for men for around \$200.

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