



Company Profile: Gruner & Co.

We Will Make Your Outerwear Better



Seventy-year old outerwear manufacturer Gruner & Co. believes clothing should inspire as well as perform. That's not just hyperbole: with brands such as Hart Schaffner Marx and Ike Behar, and longstanding relationships with fashion icons Stan Herman and Michael Schwartz, functionality and smart design have always had an important place in their vision.

Gruner is a family affair: Salo Gutfreund founded the company in 1949, producing rainwear for various markets; daughter Barbara came on board in 1970 and led the expansion of Gruner's product selection into leather products

and wool overcoats. She was later joined by her husband, Harvey Arfa, who charted a path into their well-known licensed products line, and then their daughter, Caroline Massel, who has pushed the business into uniform products and outerwear.

Today, Harvey and Caroline continue to innovate and grow their customer base. Gruner's coats are a staple of many national programs and coming this fall, dealers too, will be able to tap Gruner's classic looks via a new in-stock program tailored to their needs.

Gruner's success, they believe, lies in making one product well and better than anyone else. Are they right? The Pulse recently spoke with the Gruner father-daughter team to learn a bit more about the company. Excerpts appear below:

You're perhaps better known as a supplier to the consumer market. But you've spent years manufacturing for the uniform industry too. Tell us about that.

Harvey: We manufacture for the hospitality and airline industries, with Superior, Cintas, Twin Hill and Affinity Apparel, among others, calling on us for their outerwear needs. We've also worked within the law enforcement segment and have manufactured coats for departments across New York.

Uniforms and consumer wear are very different. How do you manage the differences?

Caroline: They're not as different as you think. Whether it's an airline or a retail consumer, customers want more technical properties and better styling options. The uniform industry over the years has become more fashion focused. Everyone wants to feel good in their apparel. Airline employees want to wear their coats

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all the time, not just inside a plane. Why shouldn't it be streamlined and slimmer, why shouldn't it contain all the performance features currently available? Working in a fashion forward consumer niche enables us to better understand the needs of today's uniform industry and allows us to bring those offerings to the space.

Can you give us some examples?

Caroline: Our multi-layered and triple bonded fabrics come in styling options that provide both comfort and functionality. Fabrics are soft to the touch, water repellent and breathable, and are infused with stretch features in both the shell and linings. Wool coats for colder climates are lined with compact insulation so someone standing outside can be warm without extra weight.

Much of that is the result of technology. What role has the casual approach to dress played in overall design?

Harvey: If we had this conversation ten years ago, our outerwear line would have been very different. Coats were 47 inches long back then. Today, one out of seventy items in our line is that length; everything else is trending shorter, with 34 inches being the norm for dress outerwear. The casual approach to dress has certainly influenced these changes, but that gives the wearer more options and greater flexibility. For example, our multi-layered 3 in 1 coats contain a quilted jacket that can be zipped out from a full length coat and worn separately. Hoods are hidden and removable. And let's not forget about pockets; you can have ten pockets in a coat, most of which go undetected. You can even have coats without pockets. That's great for today's lifestyle, and it doesn't compromise appearance.

Up to now, your uniform industry customers have been manufacturers. You exhibited at the last NAUMD show which indicates you're looking to expand the business model. What's that about?

Harvey: We're making a push into the dealer market, letting them know about our in-stock program for our brands and traditional tailored pieces. We're also developing a B2B website so that dealers can check inventory in real time. By fall 2020, customers will be able to get products delivered to them with a click of a button.

Let's talk products. Is there a must-have on the uniform side?



Caroline: As much as things change, they stay the same. You've heard of the little black dress; well for us, the must-have item on both the retail and uniform side is the Hart Schaffner Marx little black coat, an above-the-knee raincoat with zip-out warmer. The shell is triple bonded with a water resistant, breathable middle layer. This classic look has been a mainstay from Gruner for many years in both our retail and uniform divisions. We have updated the fit of the coat over the years, but the traditional tailoring still makes it the go-to piece for any man to wear over a suit.

Anything new or in the pipeline?

Caroline: For those seeking something more modern, we've had a lot of interest in an updated stand collar raincoat with zip and snap front from our "RED.E.TECH" collection. This collection of coats has the traditional look of gabardine but are synthetic with waterproof, breathable and stretch properties that allow the wearer to be "Ready for Anything". The collection is a great example of fashion and

technology pushing the uniform industry forward.

Outerwear was sometimes treated as an afterthought. But not anymore. What changed?

Caroline: If you put on a garment and it fits well and looks good, it makes a person better at what they are doing. That's what today's outerwear does for the customer. Right now outerwear is very trendy; the focus is on buying a new piece for every season, which we love.

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We've seen many father-son teams in this business, but the father-daughter combo is a less likely option. Was working together the plan from the outset?

Harvey: Caroline worked on Wall Street after college, but it was always our intention to have her as part of Gruner. On her first assignment she handled the transition between us and a much larger competitor. They were closing their factories and asked us to take over production. Caroline navigated that transition like an expert.

Caroline: That's because I learned from the best – my mother – who ran Gruner's production department. But I loved every part of the business, and definitely jumped in with two feet. I've been involved on the production end ever since. I'm product driven, always on the lookout for ways to make our offerings better.

You were a first-time exhibitor at NAUMD this year. How was the reception?

Caroline: It was rewarding to meet customers who know our business and have worked with my father and my grandfather. Even those we haven't worked with know our name and reputation. They know us as a reliable partner for 70 years. Longevity matters. People remember. The fact they remembered my mother and grandfather – that means a lot.

Any advice for customers?

Harvey: Approach us early in the process; we can give you ideas that will strengthen the program without compromising goals. Some things aren't market appropriate, and we'll use our expertise to work with, instead of against, the designer.

Final thoughts?

Caroline: We have the retail experience, so we're always pushing on the fashion, but from our 70 years of business experience, we're also very sensitive to needs of uniform customers. All we do is outerwear. We will make your outerwear better.

Visit www.grunerco.com/uniforms to learn more.

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