

## PUBLISHER'S BLOG

*From sportswear to masks**Outdoor Research innovates during the pandemic*

By Assunta Ng  
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

While countless companies are laying off workers and downsizing during the coronavirus pandemic, Seattle-based Outdoor Research is doing the opposite. It is now hiring, expanding, and making masks.

Making masks? What comes to my mind when I buy masks to protect myself from COVID-19? “Made in China,” not the United States, and certainly not Seattle. Can Outdoor Research compete with China though?

Creating manufacturing jobs right now goes against the norm. America's factories are dying all over the country. To cut expenses, American manufacturers have outsourced their jobs to other parts of the world. Some have shut down factories in America, and favoring factories in countries like China, Vietnam, and Mexico.

Relying on outsiders to provide us with luxurious products, and even simple “essential” products like masks, seems to tell a sad story about Uncle Sam. So how does Outdoor Research buck the trend?

### How Outdoor Research discovered the mask idea

Started in 1981, Outdoor Research manufactures technical apparel and gear for outdoor sports, including alpinism, rock and ice climbing, backpacking, paddling,



Drive-thru job fair at Outdoor Research on May 16

and backcountry skiing and snowboarding. Dan Nordstrom, a member of the well-renowned Nordstrom family, bought the business in 2003. Outdoor Research also has a Korean partner, Youngone Corporation, a global manufacturer, which also has an office in Seattle.



From left: Outdoor representatives Amy McCleanless, Feng He, and Andrew Kutz. Employees wear company-made masks.

Organizations love to innovate so they can thrive. But innovative ideas don't come by easily. It takes lots of money and resources, and years of research and development. However, it could jump out of the blue effortlessly if the team knows how to encourage and inspire each other.

In Outdoor Research's case, it began with the right questions during a management brainstorming session, according to Brent Zwiers, director of operations.

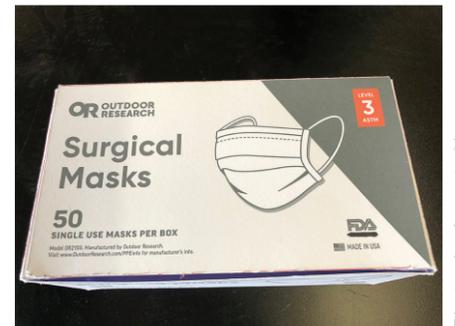
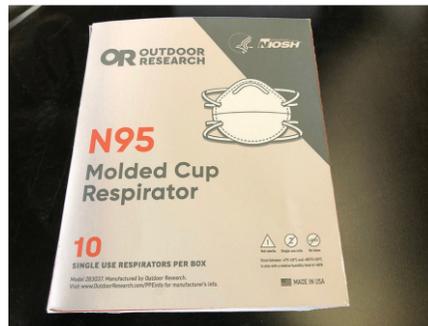
“How could we help those health care workers, first responders, and community members who were, and remain, on the front lines of battling this disease?”

“What can we do to help?” and “What is needed now?” are key questions to figuring out what a company can do to fill a need. It sets the stage for serious thinking.

What led to the conclusion of making masks was when management decided to shut down for two weeks to implement safety measures and clean the whole building. Management was working from home, while employees used their vacation time to stay home.

“The process was a very fast one,” said Zwiers. “We had closed our sewing

see **BLOG on 9**



# Thank You

The board of the United Chinese Americans of Washington would like to thank the following organizations for their donations to fight COVID-19. Together, we raised \$140,000 for Evergreen Health Medical Center to buy PPE and medical equipment. We couldn't have done it without you.

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35. Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs (APAPA)
36. Wells Chiropractic, Wellness Spin Clinic



Representatives from the Chinese American community unveil their contribution. From left: Miao Wang, nurse; Qiong Chen, VP of HUST Alumni Association of Seattle; Hong Qi, secretary of UCAWA; Xiaoning Jiang, Deputy Director Information Technology at City of Kirkland; and Xuemei Su, nurse.

37. North America China Council
38. Chongqing People's Association of Seattle
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59. Soo Yuen Benevolent Assortment
60. Seattle Suey Sing Association
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65. Teng Smiles Orthodontics

Photo courtesy of UCAWA

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**BLOG from 6**

factory out of an abundance of caution as we designed, wrote, and practiced our procedure for reopening as safely as possible. While we were also doing this, we were discussing the ideas of making masks and what it would take.

“This was not a traditional process for starting a new business. We didn’t make a big plan, study for months or years [about] the market.” But management took immediate action, studying and researching on machines they need to buy, and learning how to make masks. The company has already sewn gloves and many other items.

“The process of making masks is similar to our other products in the sense that they both are making something,” said Zwiers. “It’s being in a factory, working with machinery and teams of people to make a tangible product. They are also vastly different. The materials are different, which meant finding and securing a new supply chain, the machines are larger, more complicated and automated, which means finding the machines, learning how they work, how to repair them and keep them operational.”

The rest is history. Today, the company has bought six mask-production machines from China. The machines were flown over to Seattle, rather than shipping them. Timing and speed are important for an organization to succeed when seizing on a new market.

Zwiers said it’s “exciting and terrifying

to do something new and using our skills to help. The company has invested a lot, pushing hard.” To move fast, one entire floor (warehouse space) of the building, about 15,000 square feet, has been cleared for the mask department.

**How are OR masks different from China’s?**

“Outdoor Research’s masks are made in Seattle from materials that are completely sourced and made in the USA,” said Zwiers. “We take great pride in the quality of all of our products and are excited to provide them to the organizations that need them in the fight against the virus.”

Feng He, a production manager and a Chinese immigrant, said Outdoor Research is still testing the equipment. Its machines produced 10,000 masks last week. If the machine is in full capacity, it can produce 140,000 masks a day.

The machines are automatic, but require operators to run them. It also has hired sewers to sew fabric masks. Outdoor Research will be producing both surgical and N95 masks. And it already has customers. They are selling wholesale to the federal and Washington state government. The Federal Emergency Management Agency is one of its customers. Outdoor Research has to hire over 100 new employees for its new mask department.

**Outdoor’s accomplishments**

During COVID-19, factory workers are at risk for infection as many plants’

layout don’t conform to social distancing standards. At Outdoor Research, not a single worker has been infected, and it does not allow visitors.

The company has implemented policies to protect workers, such as providing rides to workers as close as Chinatown-International District and as far as Renton. All employees are encouraged to drive or have family members drive them to work. Employees are told to avoid public transportation. The employee’ lunch room with microwaves has been temporarily closed. Employees bring their lunches in warm containers. The restrooms are all automatic, including doors, flushing, and soap containers. No one has to touch anything when they go to the restrooms.

Outdoor Research has employed a lot of immigrants, especially Asians. Some immigrants got their first job with Outdoor Research, and have stayed there ever since. I interviewed one of them, who requested I not reveal her name because she didn’t have permission for the interview. She has worked there for 20 years. And she raved about all the benefits she has been receiving, including dental, vision, and not just health insurance.

According to He, half of the company’s 300-plus employees, at its headquarter on 1st Avenue South, are immigrants. It also has a warehouse in Des Moines, and another location in California with over 100 workers

What inspired me to write this story was Outdoor Research’s classified

advertisement in the Northwest Asian Weekly and Seattle Chinese Post. It said, “hiring multiple positions with a new face mask production department.” And “no experience necessary, with training and benefits.” And the company isn’t just hiring. It has had no layoffs during the pandemic. It might sound too good to be true! But it’s true.

When Outdoor Research advertised for a job fair a month ago, I was curious, so I went.

It was a drive-thru job fair held in an open parking lot. Streams of cars drove through. Four company representatives wearing masks greeted people inside their cars, asking them to fill out applications. I guess when a company is determined to get things done, no matter how challenging it is, it will get it done. They hired more than 50 people at that fair, and they still need to hire a lot more since mask machines can run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Yes, evening and weekend shifts are available.

And if you are looking for job satisfaction and pride, Outdoor Research might be one of those places. Making things from start to finish can provide huge satisfaction, especially products which can save lives. And made in Seattle, from materials that are completely sourced and made in the USA, would change the narrative that America can manufacture, one mask at a time. ■

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**SURVIVAL TIPS from 1**

customer service can still chip in by helping to prepare takeout orders, or by delivering food, thereby cutting down on labor costs.

Another strategy that local restaurants have implemented to stay afloat is to limit their menu. With fewer dishes to prepare, owners don’t have to buy as much food. The

operators we talked to have also kept their prices the same, so as to retain customers.

As demonstrated in the JBF survey, most restaurants will permanently close because owners do not have the financial resources to hang on. The ones who have no debt, have sufficient reserves, and own their own real estate (so they don’t have to pay a lease), are in a better position to survive the COVID-19 economic storm.

More than half of the operators who responded to the JBF survey said they have taken on at least \$50,000 in new debt obligations due to the pandemic. Among respondents, 80% had applied for a new Small Business Administration loan, 58% had applied for an Economic Industry Disaster Loan or grant, and 34% said they had applied for a community-based loan or grant through their city or state. ■

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This contract includes development and submittal of an Equity and Social Justice (ESJ) Innovation Plan. The ESJ Innovation Plan details the approach, strategies, and actionable steps that will be taken to maximize the participation of Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) and Women Business Enterprise (WBE) firms. Both MBE and WBE firms

must be certified by the State of Washington Office of Minority and Women’s Business Enterprises.

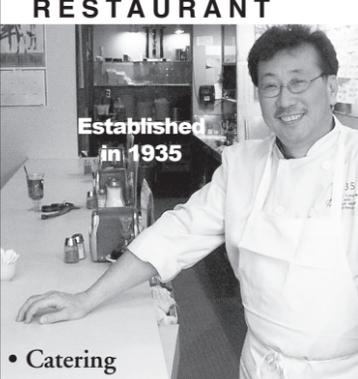
Total Estimated Price for Phase 1: \$400,000

Total Estimated Price for all Phases: \$2,000,000

All solicitation documents are published at: [https://procurement.kingcounty.gov/procurement\\_ovr/login.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2fprocurement\\_ovr%2fdefault.aspx](https://procurement.kingcounty.gov/procurement_ovr/login.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2fprocurement_ovr%2fdefault.aspx)

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