

# One Of America's Best Manufacturers Is This Japanese Zipper Maker



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Manufacturing

*I write about all facets of manufacturing.*



You most likely know YKK through their most prominent product, zippers like these.  
IMAGE COURTESY YKK

A strong piece of evidence in support of the many current calls to reshore American manufacturing is the tremendous performance by the many thousands of existing producers already working here.

I already knew one such standout U.S. manufacturer: Carhartt, the maker of working apparel, which I wrote about recently. As a result of that article, I learned about another: YKK, maker of zippers, other fasteners, and much more. (Who invented the zipper? Learn more here.) I found out that Carhartt became a major customer of theirs all the way back in 1974. That year Carhartt bought a million YKK zippers; today they buy about 40 million per year globally. I remember seeing the “YKK” stamp on the zipper pull of my blue jeans back when I was a kid, and it’s right there on the Wranglers I’m wearing today. Clearly they’re an American mainstay.

But they’re Japanese-owned. Founded in 1934, YKK Corporation is headquartered in Tokyo, has 46,000 employees in more than 70 countries, and has annual revenue of over \$7 billion.

In addition to fasteners, the company manufactures architectural products and industrial machinery, and provides engineering and technical services. They’re one of the world’s leading zipper manufacturers, making enough every year to circle the earth 80



YKK founder Tadao Yoshida and President Jimmy Carter, who became lifelong friends. IMAGE COURTESY YKK

They first came to America in 1960, establishing a sales office in the garment district in New York City. YKK founder Tadao Yoshida was a big believer in vertical integration, and his goal was to build a U.S. organization following that model. With the garment industry at that time centered in the southeastern states, he crossed paths with then-Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia, and they became lifelong friends. In 1974, YKK acquired 54 acres in Macon, Georgia, and built a factory there. That began YKK's commitment to American manufacturing, which would eventually grow to over 700 acres across the country as the company's U.S. business grew solidly over most of the next two decades. But that commitment would eventually be seriously challenged when most American textiles manufacturing was sent overseas in the 1990s.



The signing of the land contract for YKK's Macon, Georgia, plant in Kurobe, Japan, in 1974.  
IMAGE COURTESY YKK

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“Our culture is to focus on the long-term success of our customers and employees,” said Jim Reed, President, YKK Corporation of America. “That’s part of YKK’s philosophy of the ‘Cycle of Goodness’—no one prospers without rendering benefit to others. That came from our founder, who declared that the company is more than a profit-making machine.” He was decades ahead of his time with that now-popular notion, but that didn’t make it easy to survive the huge downturn of the U.S. apparel business at the end of the 20th century.

But YKK’s commitment to America was real. The company not only survived, but prospered, through diversification. They began selling their fasteners into new markets such as automotive, safety, medical, hygiene and even military and space applications. That’s also when they expanded their U.S. business in architectural products such as doors, windows and curtain walls.



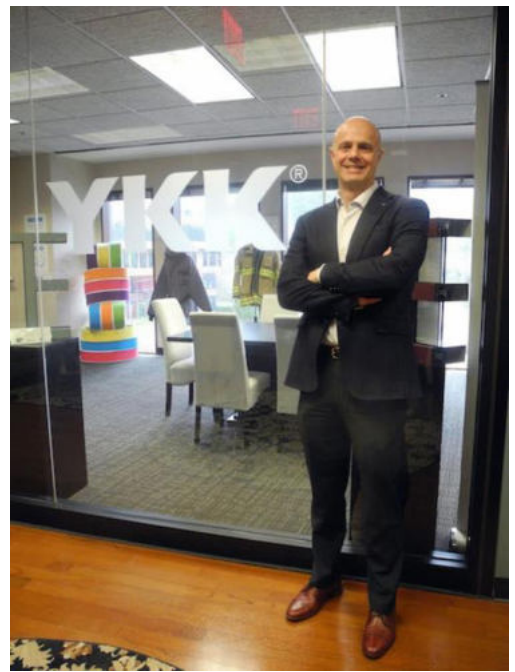
YKK's manufacturing facility in Macon, Georgia. IMAGE COURTESY YKK

“It was a stark shift in perspective when apparel went overseas,” Reed said. But the company’s prior focus on making the highest-quality fasteners paid off. “Automotive is very demanding. Their high standards for quality and performance fit our business well.”

In addition to pursuing other customers for its fasteners, the company also expanded its unique niche in machine production and engineering services to support all the new industries into which it was starting to ship products. “We provide machines that help our customers attach or dispense our products into theirs,” Reed explained. “We had our engineers begin talking to customers’ engineers about where they had problems. They could see where our technology might apply and help them solve those problems with our machinery or with unique fastener solutions.”

That focus on customers has paid off. “It’s really good to work with YKK,” said Amirtharajan Krishnasamy, Senior Product Development Engineering Manager at AccuMED Corporation, maker of such medical devices as PPE, test equipment, sensors and monitors. “They help us with the engineering and technical aspects of our products—issues in our production or issues from our customers. They customize products for us if needed. They’re a very strong partner, providing us solutions and support through the life of our products.”

Bill Cohoon, Engineering Manager at Truck Hero/Truxedo, producer of truck accessories, agreed. “They provide hook and loop closures for our soft roll-up covers,” he said. “They’ve been fantastic to work with. They first approached us with testing they’d already done to show us the benefits of their products. And they’ve been very receptive to doing further R&D work as well.”



Jim Reed, President, YKK Corporation of America.  
IMAGE COURTESY YKK

Through all the ups and downs, YKK has kept its focus on its Cycle of Goodness philosophy, particularly with respect to its own workforce and communities. “Every company is just an organization of people,” said Reed. “That’s all you are. YKK has been the beneficiary of the strength and resiliency of our employees.”

That philosophy extends to other business partners and the environment as well. “You can see that in how we treat our suppliers,” Reed explained. “You don’t beat your suppliers up, or else they can’t help make you better. We engage ours in our core values, so they help us work toward the Cycle of Goodness. You see it in our approach to the environment. For our founder wealth wasn’t in the bank—it was in everyone’s ability to enjoy the forests and streams. So we’re constantly focused on reducing our chemical, water and energy use, on recycling, on reducing or eliminating harmful processes, and on making our products recyclable or compostable.”

Reed sees a strong future ahead. “Frankly, there’s no downside right now, but lots of upside,” he said. “Apparel manufacturing may not return, but there’s still a role for America to play. Medical, for example, is a really exciting area. We’re already involved in it, but there are thousands of other potential applications for us there. U.S. manufacturing is on the cusp of a major revolution. It’s just beginning, but we’re in it for the long haul. YKK is diving right into it headlong.”