



Mike Pfothenauer Q&A: How to stay true to the outdoors for more than 40 years

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Featuring: Mike Pfothenauer

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There's plenty to admire about Mike Pfothenauer. For 41 years, the founder, owner and chief designer of Osprey Packs had led the way for one of the industry's top pack sellers. While many of his outdoor-



equipment brethren branched out and diluted their brands with the siren songs of apparel and footwear, Pfothenauer has remained committed to the category, expanding from within, through expertise, constant innovation and sport-specific solutions. We find out how Pfothenauer has kept things together for a marathon of one of the longest running, independently owned brands in the industry.

Where do you see the state of backpacking as an activity today? How is it evolving?

Backpacking, like other sports, is embracing new technologies in a big way. Gear is getting significantly lighter, better engineered and more painless to carry. Electronics and solar technologies are finding their way into new designs. It's easier to carry your comfort zone into the wilderness. There's a trickle down of this tech so that even some of the cheapest gear is better than ever, and more accessible to the masses. Backpacking is a relatively inexpensive way to escape the ever-increasing pressures of a fast, rapidly evolving, modern life.

Osprey has evolved over the years. you're now in bike, ski, trail running and travel, too. Yet, the brand has been able to retain its core values in the outdoor backpacking world. That's a not an easy juggle, and many brands have failed when they venture out. How are you doing it?

We stay focused and true to what we know and have learned for so many years: approach each design problem with a fresh view, listen to the users, build lots of playful prototypes, test them, and evolve the product until it's every bit as good as all the other stuff we build. We are very involved in the manufacturing of our gear — it's never out of our sight. Our customers rely on us to remain focused on reliable gear-carrying solutions that cover the breadth of activities they participate in.

I'm guessing that you've been to pretty much every Outdoor Retailer Summer Market. What are your thoughts on the state of the trade show — its location and timing — but also its relevance to the industry?

I've been to more than 50 consecutive summer and winter trade shows. I'm sure this event is a ritual set in stone for many participants. I like it because it's relatively nearby to our remote HQ in Southwest Colorado. If the location and timing were changed it could be very costly and disruptive for many of us. Salt Lake has evolved and diversified over the years as a cosmopolitan center as well as a fine recreational destination. If only the air quality could improve too.

Some of your employees have stuck around for decades, A rarity these days for many brands. What tips can you share for employee retention and fostering innovation among those who have been around for awhile?

It helps to be located in the center of one of the most remarkable wilderness zones in the continental United States. So does the fact that our ownership has remained relatively unchanged for over 40 years. Many of our employees have been with Osprey for 10, 15, 20 years. The trust and friendship between employees, our retailers, our vendors and the community we live in has enjoyed every chance to grow strong and stable and fruitful over all these years. So too does the opportunity to fine tune and hone our skills in every aspect of this business. Innovation happens when you are willing to accept the risks in order to reap the rewards of pushing new design boundaries. We welcome experimentation knowing that if it fails now, it can succeed later when the timing is right. For Osprey, the product is everything and everyone in our organization has the right to participate in its development and success.

We've seen some of the other outdoor heritage pack brands (Kelty and Gregory) recently get new owners — both have gone through several over the years. what's been your strategy to keep Osprey independently owned for 41 years? What's the future hold in that regard?

I've been fortunate in that I've been able to carve out a job within the company that keeps me as happy and challenged now as it ever did. I see that as my No. 1 responsibility — to never let the work get stale or predictable. I've surrounded myself with employees who work and play equally hard. We all love and cherish our local environment as well as the global connections we have developed over the years. We have remained dedicated to building packs and that focus has kept us from wandering into zones where we would be out of our depth. My intention is to see Osprey and all that it stands for survive well beyond the day I pack it in.