

WINNIPEG, MANITOBAWWW.MEC.CA

Mountain Equipment Co-operative

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) is one of the world's best known brands, and Canada's largest supplier in outdoor and camping equipment. However, like many successful businesses, MEC came from humbling beginnings. MEC originated in 1971 in British Columbia by a dozen friends who wanted to provide people who shared their passion for the outdoors with quality gear that was not typically available in Canada.

These visionaries incorporated the business as a member-owned co-operative, which has now grown to consist of over 3 million members worldwide (24,000 in Manitoba), making it the largest retail co-operative in Canada in terms of membership. Members can buy climbing, watersport, cycling, snowsport, hiking and camping gear at MEC stores throughout Canada as well as online. However, MEC is unique as they work to balance the requirement of

growing a sustainable business with the requirement of promoting sustainable consumption patterns. MEC advertises minimally so as to avoid promoting consumerism, and they rigorously pre-test gear in order to sell only the longest lasting products in order to reduce waste, even though selling lower quality products would likely be more profitable.

In keeping with the philosophy of reducing consumption and waste, most locations offer bike and ski repair shops, and host gear auctions. In addition, every outlet participates in MEC's online gear swap for those who cannot afford to purchase new →



→ equipment. MEC is also dedicated to sharing its knowledge with the public by organizing customized lectures and store tours for groups interested in learning about outdoor gear, trip planning, corporate responsibility and environmental sustainability. Because MEC always uses an environmental lens, there is no car parking for employees at their stores (and limited customer parking). Instead, they have showers, secure bike storage and bike repair tools available to encourage staff to commute by bike.

MEC also has a strong commitment to its 2000 employees, about 50 of whom work in Winnipeg. Employee benefits include ongoing job and infield training, flexibility (they encourage workers to build further outdoor experience), and the chance to test new equipment. Not only will the company provide tuition assistance for courses that may or may not be work-related, but they also offer employees no interest loans to purchase a computer, bike or boat.

As a member-owned co-operative, MEC incorporates democratic decision-making in their operations. The price of membership has not changed since the 1970s: a one-time \$5 fee still buys members the chance to shop in MEC stores, vote for the company's board of directors, and attend their AGM.

In accordance with co-op principles, MEC also reinvests profits in the community. All members benefit from surpluses as they are converted to lower prices and expanded services. In addition, at the end of each fiscal year, MEC returns financial surpluses to members in the form of patronage shares. MEC also directs a portion of profits to their Community Contributions program, which provides in-kind donations and grants to environmental initiatives like the Canadian Parks and

Wilderness Society and various cycling advocacy groups. In 2007, MEC joined 1% For the Planet, an alliance of businesses that each donate a full 1% of their annual gross sales to environmental projects. MEC is also changing sustainable production and ethical labour standards around the world through its ethical purchasing policies. They only purchase gear from manufacturers that meet certain labour standards, including safe working conditions, legal working hours, and reasonable wages.

Furthering MEC's environmental commitments, the Winnipeg location, which opened in 2002, is widely considered as the most energy-efficient commercial outlet in Canada, and one of the most environmentally friendly in the world. The company has always been committed to green buildings, and incorporates recycled materials, efficient roofing and composting toilets into all of their stores. In Winnipeg, they converted three deserted buildings into one of their most environmentally responsible stores yet. MEC reused or recycled approximately 95% of the original buildings' materials, which resulted in an 80% reduction in energy use during construction.

A model to the world of corporate citizenship, Mountain Equipment Co-op is re-shaping a whole industry, including creating better working conditions for production workers around the world, while sourcing, selling, and building in a manner that reduces the ecological footprint of their activities. The impact is at significant scale, with many jobs created, profits distributed through savings and patronage shares to millions of members worldwide, and many more community initiatives supported through their promotional, funding, and other supportive strategies.