

Partnerships, Flag Shops and a whole lot of thread.



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The calm whir of a sewing machine fills the air, signaling that work is underway. The chatter of female voices can be heard throughout the office. Many of these women have mental health challenges or are new residents to the Vancouver area. As producers in Common Thread Cooperative, women are gaining the skills and confidence to strengthen their communities and build economic independence.

Common Thread is a marketing cooperative that works to support the entrepreneurial success of individuals and group sewing agencies in the Vancouver region. The cooperative, in operation since 2010, has two main roles, to procure contracts and to build skills by teaching the ancient art of sewing – while also matching producers with the jobs they are best skilled at. Melanie Conn saw the opportunity for Common Thread when she noticed the number of small sewing Social Enterprises spread across Canada. Social Enterprises are businesses that focus on hiring demographic groups who often face barriers when accessing employment in the traditional workforce environment, *“These sewing organizations had clear reasons for existing: Income and skill creation for women,”* she explains. Melanie noticed another challenge, *“The social enterprises could get the equipment and skills for people – but when it came time for business and marketing, they struggled.”* She realized that a cooperative with the capacity to procure contracts for these groups could fill an important gap and provide a reliable stream of work.

But Melanie couldn't do it alone; her idea was brought to life when she had the fortune of meeting Jenette MacArthur, Coordinator of SEED (Skills, Esteem and Employment Development) at the Kettle Friendship Society. Jenette had already been approached by Commercial Drive Business Improvement Association to make bags from their used banners as a fundraiser for their green initiatives. This opportunity fit in perfectly with Melanie's idea, and the two set out on a mission to make it happen. Melanie and Jenette connected with individual women and sewing groups throughout the lower mainland of Vancouver to get the idea up and running. Partnerships and teamwork comprise the core model of success for Common Thread Cooperative. Across private, public and civic networks, they have collaborated with organizations and individuals to achieve their vision. *“We can't do it all by ourselves, we really need the support of other organizations [to succeed].”*

One of their most unique relationships is that with a local business, The Flag Shop, a local sewing company specializing in the production of flags and banners. Susan Braverman, President, and a woman with strong social values, offers space and

facilities from The Flag Shop to support Common Thread with its work. *“It was an easy fit,”* says Susan, *“It’s not an inconvenience for us to make this relationship happen. Giving should be easy.”* When asked what learning she can share from her experience, Susan says that all businesses should look at their core activities and find a partner organization that is a good match. *“I chose to work with an organization that fit in nicely with what I already did,”* she explains, *“our relationship came naturally. Common Thread is now a part of our family.”*

Integral to the design of Common Thread, is the consideration of social, environmental, and financial bottom lines. The cooperative’s products are made of repurposed material from flags and banners. Clients of The Flag Shop are encouraged to donate their old banners to Common Thread as material for repurposing. Common Thread producers are given a multitude of training and social supports: Grants awarded to the cooperative are invested exclusively into training programs for producers. Financial viability is a key priority of the organization, and after several years, Common Thread is now able to offset its entire operational costs with its generated sales revenue. In just three years the organization has grown significantly, doubling in sales from their second to third year of business. As Melanie explains, *“In order to achieve our social and environmental objectives, we needed to have a good business and generate enough sales to pay people in a meaningful way. The more sustainable the business is, the better we are.”*

The cooperative model and community support has allowed Common Thread to stay committed to both social and financial bottom lines. *“We are not a low cost service. People are willing to pay a fair price, because they feel good about their purchase, they know there is a good end to it.”* Employing 20 producers and acting as the “glue” that holds a diverse and unique production system together, Common Thread has garnered support from other organizations with similar objectives and commitments, including the Cooperators, who are both philanthropic contributors and prized customers. A beacon of light for many Social Enterprises in Canada, Common Thread demonstrates the achievements that can be made through collaboration, partnerships and teamwork.

For more information visit:

Common Thread:

<http://www.commonthreadcoop.ca/>

The Flag Shop (Vancouver):

<http://vancouver.flagshop.com/>

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