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BRANDED GOODS Source By Roderick Craig Published 2001-11-15

Norway's abundant natural resources have formed the backbone of the country's economy, and Norway is best known abroad for its dynamic offshore petroleum, fisheries, shipping, light metals, and paper and pulp industries. However, the consumer sector is rapidly emerging as a significant growth sector, with a diverse array of Norwegian branded products enjoying increasing popularity in markets around the world. Many manufacturers are actively pursuing distribution and reselling partnerships on the international market in order to promote such growth. One example of this is Åsgård® Scandinavian Heritage™, which represents eight different companies that cover various niches of the consumer goods sector. Through ventures such as this, manufacturers are bringing Norwegian brands into the forefront in niche segments worldwide.

Crafting Quality Products

Most companies active in the Norwegian consumer sector are relatively small enterprises that focus on niche market segments, producing quality goods using top raw materials and expert crafting and production methods. As the reputation of their merchandise has spread on international markets, these companies have increasingly focused their attention on the untapped opportunities of the export market. As a result, the export tally, as well as the competitiveness, of Norwegian consumer brands is steadily gaining strength. Some are well-established players in the sector, such as Jopo AS, which has been producing luxury leather goods for the gift market and tailor-made luggage since 1949. Others, such as Regatta AS, are newcomers to the field, and have diversified from their earlier core products to embrace new opportunities using their in-house skills. In Regatta's case, the company has been working with buoyancy products, such as life vests, for the professional market since 1950, and now produces a range of flotation gear aimed at the consumer sports sailing market.

Life in a Cold Climate

The harsh northern climate has taught Norwegians how to bundle up well – especially the hunters, fishermen and herds-men who spend long hours out in the cold. Helly Hansen, an international producer of durable outdoor performance gear, grew out of the desire of a hardy Norwegian sailor to equip his contemporaries with better waterproofs 120 years ago.

More recently, Jerven AS has developed its core product, a thermal-insulated survival bag, to prevent loss of body heat during prolonged exposure to the elements. The Jerven bag is now being adapted for use by military personnel for winter combat – a good example of how resourceful Norwegian companies in the consumer sector are finding ways to adapt their products to wider applications and gain access to new markets.

The native passion for the great outdoors, and especially for winter sports and skiing, has given rise to a broad range of related products. Swix Sport AS has become a global brand for ski accessories, and its versatile selection of ski waxes is used by top-ranking Olympic skiers worldwide. Fjellpulken AS is a major global supplier of pulks – small sleds that can be harnessed to skiers – that have been used to carry food and other essentials on many a record-setting polar expedition. Norø Industri AS, for its part, is one of the world's largest producers of kicksleds, exporting over 30,000 of these elegantly simple means of conveyance annually, while Springer AS specializes in the supply of ingenious dog tethers for bikes, so pet-owners and their dogs can enjoy summer days outdoors happily and safely.

Versatile Wool

Not surprisingly, Norway also excels in the production of woollens. Available in a myriad of patterns and colours, Norwegian woollen garments are renowned for their design and durability. Traditional Norwegian sweaters – such as those produced by Skjæveland Strikkevarefabrikk AS – are particularly popular on the international market, but there are also contemporary fashions available in a wide variety of colours and styles, including classic buckled cardigans for men, women and children, elegant ladies' jackets, and sporty pullovers for the whole family. Accessories such as hats, headbands, scarves, mittens, blankets, and armchair throws for the home are also widely available, as well as more niche-oriented products such as the versatile Voksi® sleeping bag and other warm woollen accessories for infants and small children manufactured by Ullkorga AS.

New companies such as Ulvang, a manufacturer of sports and leisurewear, are also rediscovering wool as the original high-tech fibre. Fine craftsmanship and the use of 100 per cent pure wool are hallmarks of Norwegian apparel, whether garments are hand-knitted or manufactured using modern production methods.

Companies such as ODA of Norway AS also demonstrate how a flair for chic design can be combined with traditional elements and Viking motifs to create woollen garments worthy of any leading fashion house.

Delicacies from the North

In the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, Norway's fisheries have spawned a number of household names – such as King Oscar sardines, known the world over. Salmon and other seafood comprise one of Norway's largest export segments, and there are many small companies active in the export market alongside such giants as Norway Seafoods AS. Here, as well, innovative companies are constantly on the look-out for potential markets. Norshell AS, for example, has been pioneering efforts to sell Norwegian shellfish in Europe since 1997, and is moving into the field of value-added products, offering customers who are looking for extra quality a range of value-added processed shellfish products. Other companies, such as the Brynild Group AS, are extending their market reach from seafood to other types of foods – in this case, confectionery including pastilles and lollipops. Another confectionery manufacturer, Hval Sjokolade AS, creates chocolate delicacies based on traditional recipes using quality milk from Norwegian cattle. In the dairy sector, TINE Norwegian Dairies BA, Norway's largest dairy producer, is taking active steps to find new overseas markets for its range of cheese and other dairy products – among them the famed Norwegian brunost, or caramelized goat's cheese.

Practical and Beautiful Gifts

Norway's many giftware companies and handicraft workshops also supply important national consumer brands. They offer a kaleidoscope of gift items, from keepsake souvenirs to intricately worked objets d'art that wed traditional folk art with modern, sophisticated design. These articles utilize natural materials such as wood and stone, and feature decorative motifs and subjects drawn from the natural world. In keeping with Norwegian tradition, these items are not, of course, only for show – each also has a practical use. The combination of usefulness and elegance is one reason why Norwegian handicrafts and giftware consistently appeal to a growing audience outside Norway.

An Eye for Detail

Norwegian metalwork is in high demand overseas. Skilled metalworkers practice their craft using methods passed down for generations. Polished pewter reproductions of beer tankards, shot glasses, candlesticks and platters, as well as more contemporary cheese slicers, cake knives and corkscrews have taken the international market by storm. Companies such as Buodd Tinn AS also use pewter to handcraft a wide range of pendants and other jewellery based on traditional Viking motifs. Worn in times past by grazing sheep, goats, and cattle, brass-patina metal bells such as those manufactured by Moen Bjellfabrikk AS are also enjoying a resurgence in popularity, primarily as cheering bells at sporting events. Norwegian silverwork is world renowned. Silver is handcrafted into the intricate filigree brooches and buckles, called sølje, used to embellish the national costume, or bunad. Norwegian silversmiths also produce a wide variety of other jewellery, including delicate filigree work like that created by Setesdalsylv AS, and items such as condiment sets and flatware. The selection ranges from Viking patterns and motifs to the very latest in Scandinavian design, characterized by smooth contours and a mirror-like finish. Norwegian companies also manufacture top-quality tableware, providing a wide selection of ceramics, china, and glassware for every taste. Printed and embroidered table linens and other decorative textiles are available in many different colours and styles.

Something for Everyone

Norwegian publishers produce a large selection of beautifully illustrated works that are suitable for coffee tables and as corporate gifts. Also available are calendars, postcard packs, playing cards, and other printed memorabilia sporting photos of Norway's dramatic and varied landscape. More unusual gift items include purses, hats, and traditional boots crafted in seal skin, and leather items made from moose hide. Sprung from the rich fabric of Norwegian folklore, troll figurines, such as the loveable fairy-tale characters produced by Fosse-Troll AS, are becoming more and more popular, with a dedicated Troll Club catering to collectors worldwide. A broad range of the shaggy-haired, mysterious figures is available, depicting characters of all ages and attitudes.

Norwegian companies offer many and varied consumer goods, all the while paying special attention to consistent quality standards and environmental friendliness in production methods. Many manufacturers have diversified their product lines in recent years, and thus offer a much wider range of branded goods to consumers around the world. As a result, an increasing number of Norwegian brands are making their way onto the world stage.