

The advantage of being small

By **João** on May 30, 2016 at 8:00 am

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You may have never heard of YKK, but you may well be wearing one.

“Little parts. Big difference.” That’s how YKK, the world leader in zippers, announces itself. Seth Stevenson, at Slate, [gives us a glimpse](#) of this “mysterious” (OK, let’s simply call it ‘low-profile’) Japanese company.

YKK’s zippers are considered in the apparel industry the most reliable ones. But zippers are not only a small component of the final product, but they are typically overlooked by end customers. As the article points out, “You don’t buy your jeans and jackets by looking for their letters on that pull. Likewise, you almost certainly wouldn’t nix a garment purchase because the zipper isn’t YKK”.

Close up of a YKK zipper on blue jeans (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

We might think that this low visibility could make YKK zippers a vulnerable target for cost cutting exercises. However, YKK’s reputation for reliability gains a particular strength when we

consider the tiny percentage of garments overall costs that a good quality zipper represents. As the article describes, “a typical 14inch ‘invisible’ YKK nylon zipper (the kind that disappears behind fabric when you zip up the back of a dress) costs about 32 cents. For an apparel maker designing a garment that will cost \$40-\$65 to manufacture, and will retail for three times that much or more, it’s simply not worth it to skimp. ‘The last thing we want to do is go with a competitor to save eight or nine cents per zipper and then have those zippers pop,’ says Steve Clima, Turk’s senior production manager. ‘The cost difference just isn’t enough given the overall margins.’” As another producer said, “the customer will blame the maker of the whole garment even if the zipper was the part that failed”.

As lolly-pop producers discovered long ago, being responsible for a tiny fraction of customers’ overall spending (in this case, the manufacturers’ spending) allows some lee-way to set premium prices without suffering significant competitive loss. This relative price insensitivity significantly compromises Chinese rivals’ strategies, based on low cost and even on expedite, flexible production of custom novelty orders.

The definitive proof? Check [our recent post](#): even the price-cruncher Lidl had YKK zippers in their 5,99£ (simplified version of) jeans!

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