**When Jeans Don’t Fit a Woman Past Adolescence, a Business Is Born**

**By JAMES FLANIGAN**

Lisa Rudes Sandel recalled an unhappy experience in the [Barneys New York](http://www.nytimes.com/redirect/marketwatch/redirect.ctx?MW=http://custom.marketwatch.com/custom/nyt-com/html-companyprofile.asp&symb=BNNY) store in Beverly Hills a few years ago. She said she had tried on a fashionable pair of jeans but found they didn’t fit right — too small in places, made for the low-cut look that was then the rage.

Ms. Sandel told the sales clerk she didn’t like the jeans. “But I felt worse when I left the store than when I walked in,” she recalled recently. “They didn’t fit me, but no way I’m a size 13. The jeans weren’t made for someone 40 years old.”

Ms. Sandel, however, was not just any woman shopping in vain for a garment that fit right. She was in the apparel business, working with her father, George Rudes, at St. Germain, a maker of women’s sportswear. So she talked to him about her idea of “making a jean for women who were not being paid attention to.”

From that beginning in 2004, the family started a new company, named Not Your Daughter’s Jeans — with a NYDJ label. Ms. Sandel, her father and her sister, Leslie Rudes, put together an investment of $250,000 for the start-up. And in April 2005, they brought out the Tummy Tuck jean line, which features strategic reinforcements.

“We put in panels to reinforce the tummy,” Mr. Rudes explained, demonstrating with a pair of NYDJ jeans at his factory in Vernon, an exclusively industrial city with no residents near downtown Los Angeles. “But we use stretch fabric so there is give in the thighs. This jean is made for women with curves.”

Understanding the older customer is one of two advantages he says the company has. “Our customers are sizes 10, 12 and 14 — we’re reaching the baby boomers who are in their 50’s,” said Mr. Rudes, who is 77 years old and has worked in the apparel business since he was a teenager.

“Oh, but I know women of 38 who love these jeans,” said Ms. Sandel, 42, who speaks to customers at department and specialty stores around the country as part of NYDJ’s marketing.

Whatever their age, women evidently are buying the product. “The year we brought out Tummy Tuck, our sales went to $7 million from $2.2 million the previous year when we were in St. Germain,” Mr. Rudes said, referring to the 26-year-old company that he has closed, at least for now. And this year, “we’ll do $40 million.”

Tummy Tuck jeans, which retail for $88 a pair at Nordstrom, Dillard’s, Macy’s and Bloomingdales and 1,000 specialty stores, are a fashion product, he explained, a niche in the enormous blue jeans market where 450 million pairs are sold every year.

But being in the fashion segment calls up the other advantage Mr. Rudes claims for his company: NYDJ jeans are made in the United States from denim fabric imported from China. “The great majority of jeans sell for under $30 a pair at [Wal-Mart](http://www.nytimes.com/redirect/marketwatch/redirect.ctx?MW=http://custom.marketwatch.com/custom/nyt-com/html-companyprofile.asp&symb=WMT), Costco and other mass retailers and they can wait the 90 to 120 days it takes to get delivery from China,” Mr. Rudes explained. “But stores want up-to-the-minute fashion and quick changes, so you have to make the products here.”

NYDJ, which does the designing, finishing and shipping, relies on a network of specialized factories to do the cutting, sewing and laundering. And those factories are not in other countries, but close by in the busy industrial streets near downtown Los Angeles.

It is a surprisingly vibrant complex of businesses for an industry that many people think went overseas a long time ago. There are 11,529 companies in the Los Angeles and Southern California textile and apparel industry, a larger garment industry than in any other American city, according to Ilse Metchek, head of the California Fashion Association, an industry group. They employ 122,362 workers.

To be sure, there are fewer employees today than worked here a decade ago. But currently business is brisk because modern retailers want flexibility and speed.

For example Moshe Tsabag, owner of Hot Kiss, a maker of clothing and accessories for teenage girls, needs “quick turnaround time because the stores are demanding quicker deliveries to react to new trends.” Mr. Tsabag, who has 28 years in the garment trade, said, “It’s difficult to find enough contractors in Los Angeles to handle all the work.”

He could have a new supplier in Karl Nusser, a garment industry entrepreneur from South Africa who came to Los Angeles three months ago and purchased California Sewing Services, a contractor with 160 industrial sewing machines. Mr. Nusser plans to offer garment makers and retailers more than sewing services by acquiring other contractors. “It could be cheaper to have a one-stop shop from pattern making to finished garment,” he said.

On the other hand, specialization and decentralization are age-old in the business. Todd Rutkin Inc., for example, is a cutting service dating to 1966. The company now has six computerized cutting machines slicing fabric precisely in a high-ceilinged room resembling an airplane hangar at its south Los Angeles factory.

The factory is run by Jan Rutkin, president and daughter of the founder. Cutting is a tough business, Ms. Rutkin said. “In a $20 garment, 50 cents is the cutting,” she said. “You need a lot of volume.”

It is a tough business but one that creates a variety of jobs in the Los Angeles area. Operators of expensive computerized machinery can make $15 an hour with benefits, Ms. Rutkin said. And employees who gain advanced skills can move up.

Sela Garcia, who took special courses as Los Angeles Trade Tech College, is a manager in the grading and marking department at Todd Rutkin. She must enter patterns on a computer program, calculating how machines are to cut garments in all the various sizes and dimensions. Ms Garcia is paid more than $50,000 a year, Ms. Rutkin said.

Some jobs are unique. Margie Milaney, for example, is a “fit” model. That is, she is a perfect size 8, so clothing is tested on her and adjusted to make it fit without hitches or wrinkles. Patterns for other sizes are adjusted up and down from size 8. Ms. Milaney, 67, models for many companies, including Wal-Mart and Not Your Daughter’s Jeans — at rates of $175 an hour, according to George Rudes. How does she remain a perfect size 8? “I exercise and watch what I eat,” Ms. Milaney said. “Wal-Mart measures you every month.”

Of course, in a fast-moving field like apparel, NYDJ’s success with Tummy Tuck jeans could be threatened by competitors producing a reinforced jean of their own. “You cannot patent a clothing design,” Ms. Metchek of California Fashion pointed out.

Mr. Rudes is not concerned, because working with stretch fabrics is not so easy, he said. Mr. Rudes recalled starting out selling fabric for his father’s company in New York: “I’d go to every apparel house and say ‘we have brown, do you want to buy brown?’ ”

And now, Ms. Sandel said, “NYDJ is producing other styles and colors, including Tummy Tuck skirts in brown corduroy. Chocolate brown is the new black.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/21/business/21sbiz.html