

Pin Company Hits Olympic jackpot

Selected as Vancouver Olympics' supplier

By Wes Lafortune - Business Edge

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A small Regina-based company is going for Olympic gold by creating pins. Laurie Artiss Ltd. beat out a field of international competitors to be selected as the official supplier of pins for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. "From a sporting point of view, this is the pinnacle," says Chris Pasterfield, vice-president of Laurie Artiss Ltd. "Olympic pins is the very top." Named after its now retired founder, Laurie Artiss was the official supplier to the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. Pasterfield says the staff at Laurie Artiss understands the enormous task at hand. For the Vancouver Olympics the company will create nearly 2,000 designs. Pasterfield estimates between five and 20 million pins will be manufactured for the 2010 Olympics depending on future sponsorship agreements and the strength of retail sales. "We'll have to put together a major retail distribution system," he says. "We'll have our own sale force in Vancouver." To be selected as the winning bidder, Laurie Artiss, also known as "The Pin People," had to beat out some significant players in the pin-producing business, including competitors as far away as Norway.



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Laurie Artiss vice-president Chris Pasterfield has the plan in place to supply the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics with as many pins as are required.

For the 2010 Winter Olympics, the company has teamed up with U.S. pin manufacturer Aminco International Inc., based in Lake Forest, Calif. Founded in 1978 by William and Ann Wu, Aminco most recently supplied the pins for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. "Merchandising has moved in quantum leaps. We felt we needed some expertise in retailing," says Pasterfield. "Aminco wanted to go after Vancouver, but knew there would be an advantage in having a Canadian company involved."

With Laurie Artiss and its deep Canadian roots and Aminco bringing its merchandising experience to the fore, including pin sales over the Internet, Pasterfield expects the new enterprise created by the two companies will renew feelings of Olympic glory in Saskatchewan. "Artiss Aminco Ltd. is a Canadian company that will be based in Regina," he says. In addition to bolstering its sales force, the pin company also has plans to take on four to six more artists to be based in Vancouver. They will have the task of creating innovative designs that will capture the sport, cultural and historical themes associated with the 2010 Winter Olympics, including honouring the Aboriginal heritage of B.C. "We can only use so many designs with a hockey player," says Pasterfield. "You have to have artists that are well travelled and experienced. They need to know what they can and can't do with metal. And they have to be sensitive to Native icons." The 2010 Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) has already faced controversy over its logo - a stylized Inukshuk (stone marker) that was designed by Vancouver's Rivera Design Group - that was criticized by some groups for not depicting more closely the culture of Vancouver or B.C. "They (VANOC) have a graphics-approval system at the Vancouver Olympics," says Pasterfield. "We want to be sensitive to Native cultural icons."

Beyond the creative forces operating behind the scenes, Pasterfield says the company has teamed up with a manufacturer in China, and a yet-to-be announced operation based in Alberta, to manufacture the millions of pins that will be required in advance of the Winter Olympics that begin in Vancouver on Feb. 12, 2010. "They will manufacture exclusively for us," says Pasterfield. All the factories are required by VANOC to meet a social and environmental compact that ensures accepted international standards are maintained. Working with the same manufacturer since 1976, Pasterfield says Laurie Artiss has already had the Chinese-based

factories inspected by Olympic officials to ensure those standards are being met.

Leading up to the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, some social-rights organizations, including Oxfam, accused specific sportswear manufacturers of producing Olympic goods in factories in several Asian countries where forced overtime and low wages were the norm. The campaign, called Play Fair at the Olympics, was critical of companies including Fila, Puma and others. It's a situation that VANOC hopes to avoid in 2010 by having each company producing Olympic materials enter into an agreement that outlines in detail the expectations under which they must operate. "Environmental stewardship and social responsibility are significant elements of VANOC's strategy to host a sustainable 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games," says VANOC spokesman Chris Brumwell. "Companies that are bidding or carrying out contracts with VANOC must be guided by the specific sustainability objectives clearly outlined to them within the request for proposal (RFP)."

And not to be left out of this primer on Olympic pins are the collectors, whose enthusiasm, some say obsession, drives the business.

Ivan LeBlanc of Winnipeg has been collecting pins for the past 25 years. "I'm very excited about the Vancouver Olympics," says LeBlanc. "I'm looking forward to it." With a collection numbering 15,000 pins, LeBlanc says he has had to specialize in Olympic pins so that his avocation didn't completely take over his home. "They are on display from the floor to the ceiling," says LeBlanc. "I love the colourful representations of the different countries. The way they depict some of the sports is just fabulous." Trading and purchasing pins at international events and over the Internet has allowed LeBlanc to amass a collection that he estimates is today valued at approximately \$100,000.

Asked whether he plans to be trading pins in Vancouver in 2010, LeBlanc chuckles and says: "Health-permitting, I'll be there. I've already made arrangements." (Wes Lafortune can be reached at wes@businessedge.ca)