

Icebreaker Breaks new GROUND

*With innovative thinking
and the power of
Vectorworks software,
this successful retail
company integrated data
with design to create
a streamlined, time-
saving solution for its
merchandise space.*



Image courtesy of Icebreaker Inhouse Studio.



An Icebreaker TouchLab retail space in New York City.

Founded in 1995 by entrepreneur Jeremy Moon, Icebreaker is a pioneer in the fast-growing merino wool industry. This New Zealand outdoor, sports, and lifestyle

clothing company continues to expand its distribution worldwide, with the help of some unique and progressive CAD software features.

From New Zealand's High Country— A Fashion Revolution

In 1994 Jeremy Moon had a chance encounter with Brian Brackenridge, a New Zealand merino sheep farmer who had created a thermal t-shirt from merino wool. Moon was surprised by the texture. "It felt soft and sensual, looked lustrous, and was totally natural," he says. "It was nothing like the wool I had grown up with, which was heavy and scratchy. And you could throw this stuff in the washing machine." Soon after, Moon revolutionized the way the world saw wool with his outdoor clothing company, Icebreaker.

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*— Bill Powell, Icebreaker,
Wellington, New Zealand*

Since its inception, Icebreaker has led its competitors in the merino wool industry. With over 3,000 trading partners selling its wares in 43 countries, Icebreaker maintains production facilities around the world to keep them supplied. And the recent economic downturn has not stopped their growth. Bill Powell, production artist, says, "People will always buy quality, and we have a quality product."

Icebreaker's mission is sustainability. It's the biggest differentiator for the progressive company among the myriad of other firms riding the emerging merino wool trend. Icebreaker's products are completely natural, whereas many of the company's competitors produce synthetic garments. "In today's world I think that sustainability is a massive driver, not just to sell goods, but in the way people approach goods and want to be a part of them. For us that's very big. We love the fact that people come and try our garments on and see for themselves that it's soft, it's silky, and it's beautiful to wear," explains Powell.

In fact, Icebreaker picked up an award for a sustainable sock package that they designed to replace traditional plastic sock packages. The Icebreaker team designed the folded cardboard packaging to be easily opened at the store so that people could try on the socks—another breakthrough idea. It worked, and people enjoyed feeling the signature smoothness of the merino wool. For this innovation, Icebreaker won a gold award from the Designer's Institute of New Zealand Best Design

Awards in 2010. They also won a silver award for another packaging innovation, and received one gold and two silver awards from the Designer's Institute of New Zealand in 2010. And in 2011 they won a Best Awards bronze for Spatial Design from the Designers Institute for their Icebreaker TouchLab stores.

Powell's background is in graphic arts, and his work has been influenced by several great designers, including British sculptor and designer Eric Gill of the Arts and Crafts movement and graphic designer and art director Neville Brody. Powell says that his approach to design has changed largely based on Apple® designer and innovator Jonathan Ive's use of 3D and his ability to look at things differently. When Powell joined Icebreaker in 2007, he began working earnestly in 3D on spatial design.



Merchandise fixtures were designed with Vectorworks software using symbols, so cost information could be stored in the drawing.

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Icebreaker had been using Vectorworks® Architect software since 2006 intermittently. Bill Vincent, account manager at Megabits, the Vectorworks distributor for New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, met with Powell and his design team leader, Jo Lewis, in 2010 to address a wish list from Icebreaker. They had recently upgraded their computers

and were evaluating CAD software applications. “We gave Vectorworks a list of our issues and problems and they said ‘yes we can do this, that, and that’,” Powell recalls. “They ticked all the boxes—it was a very easy decision to make. We explored other 3D applications, but Vectorworks came out on top each time.” Vectorworks software’s powerful yet simple ability to integrate data with the 3D model offered the best solution. “That was a big thing for us, incorporating data was a big part of what we needed and most of these other applications don’t do it; they’re simply not powerful enough,” says Powell. Icebreaker upgraded to the most recent version of Vectorworks Architect software. Says Vincent, “I realized that there was something we could do that was quite radical.”

Since Powell’s background is in graphic design, he, Lewis, and Vincent decided that it was important to strengthen their use of the software with a series of training seminars, which were conducted over the Internet and recorded for future use. Powell believes that the training



Architect Case Study: Icebreaker Breaks New Ground

was a significant contributor to the success that he and the team have experienced using Vectorworks software to design their stores. In the first year he worked with the program, he dramatically increased efficiencies in both designing stores' fixtures and fittings and in communicating with a large number of trading partners.

Powell took a Vectorworks Essentials online training course to get started and then received a series of ten online lessons from Vectorworks trainer and archoncad owner Jonathan Pickup that focused on a live project so that he could learn and build at the same time. Training was key to Icebreaker's success in utilizing their CAD program. "Because I don't have an architectural background or a drafting background there are things that I still need to learn, but the great thing is that I know Vectorworks can take me there," says Powell.



Store capacity and merchandise costs are integrated into the design, so Icebreaker can efficiently calculate the cost to stock each store.

Gordon's TouchLab Takes Off

Moon has dubbed the Icebreaker-owned stores TouchLabs because they encourage people to feel and experience the surprisingly silky garments. Introduced in 2001, Icebreaker currently maintains seven TouchLabs in New Zealand and North America and has many more planned for worldwide implementation. One retail space is an Icebreaker shop within the leading outdoor goods store Gordon's Outdoor Equipment in the heart of the New Zealand capital of Wellington.

Within Gordon's 130-square-metre facility, the team's newest TouchLab is thriving. The retail design team created the design for this particular layout in about six weeks, using this live project as the focus of their training. "The retail design team absolutely loved it—it was something they just hadn't had before," says Powell. "They would have their plans and elevations and their photographs after the fit out—but nothing really in between." Typically, the team designs the store itself, then Powell adds shop fittings and fixtures, and finally, cost information is loaded into the worksheets. Since many of the stores already exist, Powell works with different layouts each time, yet he tries to tailor the design so that each Icebreaker store has a similar feel—the same branding elements, colors, styles, core displays, and even the characteristic woolen carpets. Using the Vectorworks Architect application, Powell draws up different floor plans to provide several options.

The Power of Pricing

One of the most powerful things that Powell was able to introduce to his team was the program's ability to integrate data. The software can replace the costing function of an accounting program by storing cost information in the actual drawing. Merchandise pricing information is linked to the drawing and automatically updates every time the drawing is changed. This capability eliminates the need to go back and forth between a drawing and an accounting program, saving time and ensuring accuracy. "For us that is huge because we have 3,000 stores where our clothes are sold, and we have our fixtures and fittings in a great deal of them," explains Powell. "When we send our product to a prospective retailer, we can immediately say we have these four options and if they come back and say we don't want that particular feature we take it out and it's immediately recalculated. It saves a ton of time. Traditionally we would go back and redraw it, which is extremely time consuming."

Powell used symbols for each type of clothing and associated each with a different price. He was then able to populate the design with fittings, fixtures, and clothing that instantly calculated a total cost for the entire store's merchandise. Vincent first suggested this capability to Lewis and Powell when he saw that the stores were carrying much of the same merchandise. Icebreaker could integrate data records to calculate the costs to stock each store—vital information for prospective trading partners.

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*– Bill Vincent, Megabits Trust,
Auckland, New Zealand*

But even Vincent didn't realize the impact of his suggestion until later. "I learned that it was a lot more than a straight drawing and 3D presentation tool," he says. "The fact that you can cost the fit out and also cost the stock out is very significant. It actually broadens the base for Vectorworks software as a product." For instance, Vincent cited a property developer who used worksheets to attach a cost per square

metre, as well as local council restrictions, in the rehabilitation of several buildings. With data integration, he can instantly see whether or not he'll be profitable and whether or not he meets council regulations.

3D Opens New Doors

Powell also creates 3D renderings for partner feedback, as well as drafts, plans and elevations, sometimes even including flythroughs. "Once people start seeing the potential of Vectorworks, they ask me, 'Can we do this, can we do that?'" says Powell. "And I'm saying yes a lot." He maintains that the software has given Icebreaker a decisive edge in a very competitive field. Since retail space is limited and prospective suppliers fight to woo potential trading partners, Icebreaker's graphically detailed renderings are a powerful presentation. Powell says, "Vectorworks has got a great reaction from people. They can immediately see how something would work in a high-quality 3D



rendering.” Due to the software’s render engine (powered by CINEMA 4D), the 3D is very powerful and easy to use, and the visualizations are incredibly realistic and easy to achieve.

Powell is building a full library of custom fittings and fixtures. He recently redrafted a fixture that Icebreaker had been using because it wasn’t delivering the experience the team had anticipated. They took a step back and took a different approach by considering the fixture from the way people interacted with the store as a whole. They then created a “micro area” that allowed customers to easily move around the fixture to see every side and it was redesigned to accommodate various coordinating garments, including a mixture of hanging and folded clothes, as well as accessories. Now a customer can build an entire outfit from that one fixture. Since layering is a big selling point at Icebreaker, it also encourages a layered look.

Icebreaker refreshes the graphics in its stores every six months to keep them consistent with the seasonal collection. This includes in-store signage, artistically modeled clothing photos on light boxes, wall graphics, and information graphics. “It’s a constantly evolving thing,” Powell notes. “We try to be relevant and up to date and we pride ourselves on our visual presentation; it’s not just about fixtures and fixings. We like our graphics to be very active and sensuous because we want people to react. It’s not just a sweater that you wear in cold weather—it’s a bit more than that.” The stores’ designs highlight Icebreaker’s lifestyle branding, a hallmark of its great success. Powell made use of all of the drawing tools to illustrate these components, but

he says, “The most powerful ones I found were the textures and lighting. The great selling point is when you can make it look more realistic, and textures and lighting are the two most powerful things to do it.”

At the Speed of Retail

Retail moves fast. And to keep up with it, Powell relies on his design software to communicate with potential trading partners. “The main thing for me is the speed with which you can communicate an idea,” he notes. “People have a space in the store, and they want it filled, and they want it done promptly and well. Vectorworks is just one of those tools that allows you to explore and experiment within a timeframe that we definitely didn’t have before. There’s absolutely no question that we save lots and lots of time because we can change designs so quickly. We can have five or six prospective retail partners asking for layouts, and we can send all of them in the morning whereas it used to take us a day or two to do all of the plans. That timesaving allows us to be more creative because we can sit down and say, ‘How can we make this work even better?’” With greater efficiency and an effective plan, prospective trading partners also invest more confidence in Icebreaker and are more willing to offer up their precious shelf space.

For a minimal investment in its CAD software, Icebreaker reaped a large return. As they continue to roll out TouchLabs and their merchandise around the world, they’ll gain more efficiencies in both design and communication. It’s a company that champions sustainability in more ways than one.

Acknowledgements

Profiled Firm:

Icebreaker New Zealand Ltd.
Level 2, Hope Gibbons Building
7-11 Dixon Street, Wellington 6011
PO Box 959
Phone: 0064 4 385 9113
Fax: 0064 4 385 9114

cs.nz@icebreaker.com
www.icebreaker.com

Icebreaker

Founded by Jeremy Moon in 1995, Icebreaker revolutionized the outdoor wear world by introducing merino wool, which completely changed the way people perceive wool. Winner of a 2010 Gold Award for Best Design Awards by The Designers Institute of New Zealand, Icebreaker balances ecology with economy by keeping sustainability the focal point.

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Courtesy of Icebreaker Inhouse Studio.

Local Vectorworks Distributor:

(New Zealand and the Pacific Islands)
Megabits Trust
PO Box 33 1412
Takapuna
Auckland 0740
New Zealand
Phone: 09 445 8480
info@megabits.co.nz
www.megabits.co.nz

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Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
7150 Riverwood Drive
Columbia, MD 21046 USA
Phone: 410-290-5114
Fax: 410-290-8050
www.vectorworks.net