



Sandy Caster and Jay Robert sit with some of their gear including Jim Horn (bottom right), Jim Shockey (bottom left), Wild Thing (middle) and Mathews (top right).

**SUCCESS**

# Sandy Caster & Jay Robert

## BLACKS CREEK GUIDE GEAR

One of the most noticeable marketing trends in the archery and outdoor industries today is simple product-line extensions. That is taking the name of an established product line and using that name on new and quite different products. For example, an imaginary XYZ Company, which is well known for high-end bows, decides to develop and also offer XYZ hunting scents. The process is simple and relatively easy, and the approach is usually also a mistake.

**By Bill and Sherry Krenz**  
With Interviews by Travis Reginek

The most successful product lines always have a clear-cut position carved out in the minds of consumers. XYZ means high-performance bows. Say “XYZ” and best bows is what everyone instantly thinks about. Simple line extensions don’t often work, particularly in the long run, because they don’t establish an independent position in the mind for the new products and, even more importantly, because they ultimately cloud the once-focused position of the original brand. Short-term sales gains might be realized with simple product-line extensions, but long-term brand fuzziness is never good for continued business.

However, there is a well-documented way to extend an existing product line or brand so as to maximize long-term sales of both the new and the established products. That way is to create a new position and a new name for each new product extension you develop.

One of the best examples of how that strategy can be successfully implemented is the work of Sandy Caster and Jay Robert at Blacks Creek Guide Gear.

Blacks Creek Guide Gear has fairly quickly become one of the most successful and recognized manufacturers of high-quality, high-performance hunting packs in the country.

“Nearly every outdoor retailer sells fanny packs and backpacks,” says Idaho-born Jay Robert. “The design and the quality of those packs isn’t all that great, but it’s not all that bad, either. Most of those packs will do for cost-concerned buyers. But for a better pack, serious hunters reach for Blacks Creek Guide Gear. Our packs are more expensive and of much higher quality. They are also designed to work flawlessly in the field. Guys who really appreciate their outdoor equipment have no problem spending up to \$200 or \$300 for a high-quality pack that works better, is more comfortable to wear and definitely holds up better. That’s how Sandy Caster and I have positioned Blacks Creek Guide Gear.”

Sandy Caster, also an Idaho native, has been married to her husband John for 24 years. Jay Robert has been married to his wife Sally for 21 years. Sandy and Jay are business partners.

# SYNERGISTIC



“We work well together,” says Sandy, “because our business skill sets complement each other. I’m the detail-oriented business and production administrator. Jay is the high-energy product-development, sales and marketing guy.”

Those skill sets didn’t develop overnight.

“I was raised on a farm in rural Idaho,” says Sandy. “That pretty much means that I was working as soon as I could walk. Chores were a part of life. After high school, I attended ITT Technical Institute in Boise where I received a business-administration degree. After that, I joined Micron Technology, a semiconductor manufacturer and one of the largest employers in Idaho. I worked my way up the corporate ladder and eventually landed a buying and production-scheduling position.

“But the more immersed I became in the corporate culture, the more I realized that it wasn’t what I wanted. What I really wanted was to run my own company and do so from my home. That would allow me to chase my business dreams and also be at home for the kids.

“That Christmas, I had a realization. I had been searching for a new set of saddlebags to give as a present to my husband. We had long been horse people and had enjoyed riding and hunting with our horses. The more I searched, the more frustrated I had become. Quality saddlebags like I wanted just didn’t seem to exist.

“The realization was that there were probably others, just like me, who would appreciate and pay for western horse gear of undisputed quality...and I could make and sell that gear out of my home.

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t sew a stitch. But I did have a close friend and stay-at-home mom who was a whiz with a sewing machine. We talked, and gradually we formulated a plan. She’d do the sewing, and I’d orchestrate the sales and manage the business. I quit my job at Micron Technologies and Blacks Creek Bags was formed. That was in 1991.”

Over the next two years, the business grew dramatically, as did the company’s product line.

“We started with saddlebags, but quickly added pommel and cantle bags, horse leg coverings and other horse-packing gear. Then we added gear bags and rope bags for rodeo participants. In the beginning, we sold our products to local farm and ranch stores. Gradually, we expanded outward, and eventually I was doing horse-and-western trade shows in Reno and Las Vegas.

“For my partner, who was doing all of the sewing, things became a bit overwhelming. I wanted to keep growing. She was less and less excited about all the hours. In 1993, I bought her out, taught myself to sew and plowed forward.”

By 1997, Sandy had expanded the business even further.

“In addition to the growing horse-and-western business, I had landed a sewing contract with a local doctor who had developed a fabric cast cover. To keep up with everything, I bought 40-acres adjacent to our home and built a manufacturing and shipping facility on that land. I also hired and contracted with quite a number of local ladies who could sew. Some worked out of our new facility. Others sewed at home. At times, I had up to 50 ladies sewing for us.”

About that same time, Sandy and her husband also began talking about



**TOP: Jay Robert is co-owner and CEO of Blacks Creek Guide Gear.**

**MIDDLE: Sandy Caster is co-owner and CFO of Black Creeks Guide Gear.**

**BOTTOM: Robert Martin is the sales manager and the all-around go-to-guy at Blacks Creek Guide Gear.**



developing a hunting-pack line.

“My husband John has always been an avid hunter, and he was sure that we could develop a pack line that would do well. We certainly had lots of experience with durable fabrics and heavy-duty sewing. To explore the concept further, I decided to meet with Jay Robert, a nearby sporting-goods retailer to whom we’d sold a few products. Jay had impressed me as a buyer who had a knack for looking at a product, quickly evaluating it and then offering surprisingly good improvement suggestions.”

“I had asked Blacks Creek Bags to produce a number of small packs for our store,” says Jay, “and I was impressed with how accommodating they were when I’d offered suggestions on how they could improve the prototype packs. I was doubly impressed when Sandy explained what they had in mind in the way of a complete hunting-pack lineup.”

Jay’s resume in hunting, business and particularly in sporting-good retail was well-founded.



**Jay Robert and Sandy Caster in the Blacks Creek Guide Gear warehouse getting ready to leave for the opening weekend of turkey season.**

“I’ve always been an avid hunter and a bit of an entrepreneur,” Jay explains. “Right out of high school, I started my own landscaping business. I also learned to make cabinets and worked for an outfit that made glamorous hardwood entrance doors. I eventually became the manager of the entrance-door operation. Then, in 1991, I went to work with my father, who had an Army Navy store just outside of Boise, Idaho. Gradually, I took over the operation of the store, eliminated the Army Navy surplus portion and turned everything into sporting goods and archery.

“In 1993, I renamed the store Idaho Outdoor Outfitters and further expanded the archery section. Over time, we became one of the largest archery pro shops in Idaho. Today, our archery section is over 14,000 square feet in size and we have 30 indoor shooting lanes, a TechnoHunt System and have changed the name to Archery Outfitters.”

Somewhere in the course of the discussions between Sandy and Jay, the idea of partnering on the hunting-pack line came up.

“My husband and I had thought all along that Jay would be a good business partner,” says Sandy. “We knew that I could run the



operations and production side of the new venture, and we believed that Jay would be perfect in product development, marketing and sales.”

A 50/50 partnership agreement was carefully drawn up. Sandy would retain full ownership of Blacks Creek Bags, and it would become the manufacturing side of the pack business, which would be called Blacks Creek Guide Gear.

“The partnership made sense,” says Jay. “Sandy’s administrative and manufacturing know-how was a perfect fit with my talents for hunting-product design and retail and consumer demand. It was a synergistic fit. We would work together to create a success.”

Blacks Creek Guide Gear became reality late in 1997, with Jay designing and selling the product line and Sandy making sure that the packs and related items were properly manufactured, shipped and billed.

As the business grew, the product line expanded. But to continue to grow, the partners realized that even more was



**Business partners Sandy Caster and Jay Robert work together on product design. Jay’s expertise lies in product function. Sandy’s is in production.**

needed.

“There are lots of hunting-pack manufacturers,” says Jay. “To break out from the herd, we decided that we needed to do something quite different. At first, we believed that difference would be based on product innovation and simple extension of our product line. But we quickly learned that that was a tough road. In 2003, I designed a very unique hunting pack that featured a bow pocket that folded out of the lower portion of the pack. Using that pocket and upper straps, a bow could be securely attached to the back of the pack. The concept was very innovative. But within months of its introduction, a variety of other pack manufacturers had copied the idea and one had even applied for a patent on the concept. That was an eye-opener.

“We decided that innovation was necessary, but it wasn’t enough all by itself to take Blacks Creek Guide Gear to the next level. That would take an even bigger synergistic effort.

“Sandy and I had discovered how the synergy of our business skill sets could be used to make our new company a success. What we theorized was that combining our joint efforts with much more complex line extensions would be the way to go. Along with dramatic product innovation, we would create a brand-new position and name for each new line extension we developed.”

Sandy and Jay began that process in 2004 when they hooked up with noted bowhunter Jim Horn to design the Jim Horn Signature Series of hunting packs.

“Jim was a friend and a very well-known and respected elk hunter. He had great name and face

**TOP: Sandy Caster and Robert Martin of Blacks Creek Guide Gear go over prototype products in the company product-development room.**

**BOTTOM: Robert Martin, Sandy Caster and Jay Robert inspect a special Northwest Edition Bow Case they developed for Joe’s Sporting Goods in Wilsonville, Oregon. Blacks Creek Guide Gear designs custom OEM products.**





recognition, based on his years of working with Team Primos on their widely successful television and video series. Working with Jim, we designed a series of packs for the serious western-style hunter that had every bell and whistle imaginable, including some new twists, and then produced and offered those packs at a fair market price.

“By clearly positioning those packs in that way and with Jim Horn’s name on them, we created a whole new market for us in addition to our standard Blacks Creek Guide Gear products. The Jim Horn Signature Series became practically an overnight success, and that success was created by the combined synergies of Blacks Creek Guide Gear and Jim Horn.”

Jay and Sandy configured their arrangement with Jim Horn so that Jim was paid a fair royalty on each pack sold, and he was responsible for promoting the new pack line wherever that made sense. The first new pack the team developed was dubbed the Alaskan. That’s been joined today by the All American fanny pack and the Western and Canadian backpacks.

Encouraged by their success with the Jim Horn Signature Series line extension, Jay and Sandy decided to tackle yet another line-extension project.

“My archery shop does a booming business with Mathews bows,” Jay explains. “And in 2005, I was invited by Mathews’ founder Matt McPherson to tour the Mathews facility in Wisconsin. I decided to take advantage of that opportunity to pitch Matt on our latest idea.

“Mathews’ fans love bowhunting and their Mathews bows, and they tend to appreciate high-quality outdoor gear of all sorts. Our idea was that we would develop and produce a special line of Mathews Solo Packs that we would sell only to authorized Mathews retailers. For that privilege, we would license the Mathews name and logo from Matt. We knew that Mathews had never done anything like that before and that it was a long shot, but what did we have to lose?

“After I spent the day touring the Mathews plant, I cornered Matt with a brief outline of our proposal. His initial reaction

wasn’t positive. ‘We’ve never licensed our name to anyone else,’ was his reasoning. But I persisted, and eventually he agreed to let me prepare and present a formal proposal at a later date to him and his management team. What did they have to lose?”

Jay and Sandy took five months to prepare that formal proposal and develop and produce the prototype products they envisioned in the line. Then Jay once again flew to Wisconsin and walked everyone through the concept.

“We sat around a big table and they quietly listened to everything I had to say and looked closely at everything I had to show them. We’d handmade every prototype and I had made doubly sure that the official Mathews logo was sewn onto every item perfectly. In the end, Matt simply stood up and said, ‘Let’s do this.’ I nearly fell off my chair.

“Matt had a licensing agreement drawn up on the spot and we both signed it. No one had ever approached hunting packs in this manner. It was totally new.”

Today, the Mathews Solo Pack line by Blacks Creek Guide Gear is sold only through Mathews’ retailers. It provides those retailers with a distinctive, high-quality pack, case and soft-goods line not available anywhere else. Everything, as Matt McPherson stipulated, is of exceptional quality and innovative design, befitting the Mathews name.

“What is particularly rewarding for us,” Jay adds, “is that today, Mathews licenses at least a dozen other hand-picked manufacturers to produce quality products bearing the Mathews name. The line by Blacks Creek Guide Gear was the forerunner to all of that.”

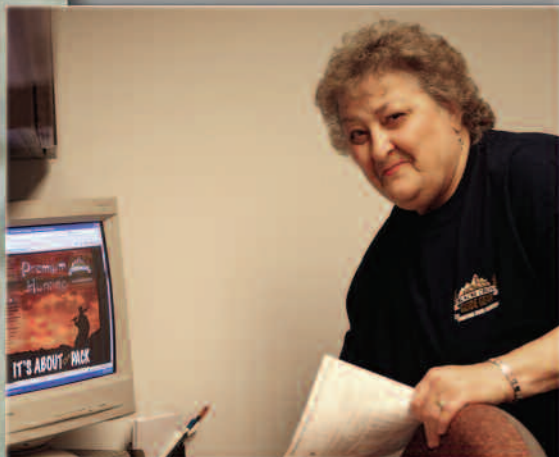
The next line extension for Sandy and Jay came from a chance meeting at the ATA Archery Trade Show. Keith Johnson of Double Bull Blinds stopped by the Blacks Creek Guide Gear booth and talked with Jay.

“Keith had been using our packs and liked them,” says Jay. “We talked and later both Keith and his partner Brooks called me to discuss the prospect of Blacks Creek Guide Gear developing and producing a very specialized pack that would comfortably and quietly carry a Double Bull Blind, along with all the other gear that blind hunters want and need.

“We quickly agreed to take on the proj-



Inside the Blacks Creek Guide Gear warehouse, Shirleta Spray and Robert Martin move a pallet of bow cases.



ect as it had all the earmarks of another successful synergistic line extension. Keith sent me a detailed list of everything the pack needed to carry and do. I gathered every one of those items and we went to work. In the end, with lots of assistance from Keith and Brooks, we developed the innovative Double Bull Wild Thing Pack. At its introduction, the Wild Thing revolutionized the way people hunted with a ground blind.”

Recently, Double Bull Ground Blinds was acquired by Primos Hunting Calls, and Jay and Sandy hope to firm up plans to work with Primos on positioning the Wild Thing as the ultimate ground-blind pack.

In 2007, yet one more stunning Blacks Creek Guide Gear line extension was introduced. This one involved a pairing with noted muzzleloader hunter, outdoor writer and TV personality Jim Shockey. The Jim Shockey No Guff pack and accessory line by Blacks Creek Guide Gear was designed with Jim’s able assistance specifically for firearms hunting in extreme conditions. The Jim Shockey Saskatchewan pack is a mid-sized daypack big on features and durability. The revolutionary Jim Shockey Yukon is an arctic-tough, external-frame pack that can handle anything. An Optics Sling and No Guff Gaiters are also offered.

With four different, complex line extensions in as many years, one might think that business partners Jay and Sandy would have run out of ideas for the core Blacks Creek Guide Gear product line. But such is not the case.


“We’ve worked as hard on those products as anything else,” says Sandy. “In fact, for 2008 we introduced the pioneering Rigg-Itt Pack System and the all-new Bone Collector Pack Series.”

“The Rigg-Itt Carry-All Pack System consists of an innovative internal-frame to which all sorts of specialized carry packages and accessories can be added,” says Jay. “There’s a soft Blind Bucket for packing heavy ground blinds, a Treestand Carry Bag, a Meat Pack and Rigg-Itt Rifle Scabbard and more. With Rigg-Itt, you can customize your pack for any hunting situation.

“The new Blacks Creek Bone Collector Pack Series was specifically designed with direct input from our nationwide sales reps, and it’s exactly what progressive retailers want and eager consumers need in the way of packs. Included in the Bone Collector Series is an ideal Whitetail Fanny Pack, the mid-sized Little Bone Collector 1.5 Backpack, the larger Big Bone Collector 2.5 Backpack and even a Predator Paradise Pack for serious year-round predator hunters.”

“In addition,” adds Sandy, “there are new bow cases, new high-quality cross-bow cases and a host of new pack accessories, all designed to keep the core Blacks Creek product line fresh and exciting.”

Today, Blacks Creek Guide Gear remains based out of Caldwell, Idaho, and business partners Sandy Caster and Jay Robert manage everything, along with their supportive staff. The packs and gear, including all of their exhilarating product-line extensions, are high quality and performance-oriented.

Like no other hunting-pack company, their strategy of synergistic line extensions has enabled them to separate Blacks Creek Guide Gear out from the clutter of normal pack competition, and it’s taken them to an all-new level. Synergistic success has proven a springboard to even more success. For more information, Circle #185, log onto blacks-creek.com or call (800) 742-1405. 

**Blacks Creek Guide Gear attributes a big part of its success to the professional and friendly efforts of its staff. Shirleta Spray (top) oversees shipping. Helen Toon (bottom) keeps the company’s website updated and the office organized. Not pictured is Susan Daniel, Blacks Creek’s professional can-do-all seamstress. Whenever someone says it can’t be done, Susan finds a way.**