

The YKK Zipper — securing quality for decades

How did the Japanese YKK zipper
earn its reputation for unbeatable
quality?

What does YKK stand for? Yoshida Kogyo Kabushikikaisha, which translates roughly from Japanese to mean Yoshida Company Ltd. It was founded in Tokyo in 1934, and while zippers are its biggest product — with many different types available — the company also makes buttons, clips and buckles, architectural equipment and machinery for engineering.

From one generation to another

Tadao Yoshida is the man who started it all, with his son Tadahiro taking over after his father's death in 1993.

At the age of 26, Tadao inherited the zipper business from the remains of another company he worked for that had gone bankrupt. As a means of solving the problems he had experienced with his previous suppliers, one of Tadao's first business decisions was to bring YKK's manufacturing processes in-house.

To avoid exporting costs, he then set up overseas branches, adopting a view that his employees both in Japan and around the world should all benefit equally in his success.

The YKK's 'Cycle of Goodness' — a concept introduced by Tadao and maintained by the company to this day — is built on the philosophy that 'no one prospers without rendering benefit to others'. It is a caring, sharing attitude within the business and also expressed outside it, with the view that everyone from customers and employees to those living within the same town as a YKK factory must all prosper from its presence in some way.

After obtaining his MBA in the US, Tadao's son Tadahiro began to build on his father's legacy. He helped to modernise and develop the brand in several ways, including setting up regional distribution centres and implementing more time-efficient automated processes.

Under Tadahiro, the size and scope of YKK as a whole has become so vast that it now has offices and factories in 71 countries, through 111 affiliated companies, with 44,674 employees.

Why is YKK generally considered the best-quality zipper?

Who would have thought that something as simple as a zipper could be so difficult to perfect? After all, it's just two strips of protruding metal teeth facing each other, with a slider that moves up and down to connect or separate them.

But for some clothing, bag and mattress manufacturers, reliability and quality are key. It's very easy for a poor quality zipper to get stuck in use, for the slider to not connect properly or fasten correctly, and in the worst cases it may even cause a garment to tear. If a consumer experiences issues of this

nature, it isn't the zipper manufacturer getting the blame or damage to their reputation — it's the brand.

YKK has a solid reputation, which is why the company has such a big and loyal following among brands who value quality. There are cheaper zipper manufacturers out there, in China particularly, and some brands do choose to cut costs by enlisting their help, but in the long term is it really worth the risk and frustration to the customer by choosing to ignore the market leader?

The YKK has earned this reputation for quality because of the meticulous attention to detail it endures over each stage of the zipper manufacturing process. Since the company's inception under Tadao, it has been busy bringing these processes in-house, from smelting its own brass, forging and moulding its zipper teeth, to weaving and dyeing the material that connects to the finished product. YKK even makes the boxes that the zippers are shipped in.

With such tight control, the brand maintains its consistency, as well as the quality and reliability of the product, the speed and efficiency of the manufacturing, and also the delivery times. No outside suppliers mean that YKK can ensure the best possible pricing for its customers, giving them little reason not to seek its help.

Why does YKK have such a huge share of the market?

Becoming the world's largest zipper manufacturer is no easy feat, but YKK has maintained this status for decades.

While the zipper's invention dates back to earlier in the 20th century — patented by the Swedish engineer Gideon Sundback as the "Separable Fastener" in 1917 — YKK has certainly helped to develop and improve the product over the years.

In 1958, for example, it released the Conceal design, which is a form of zipper that does not have its teeth on display, resulting in a more elegant look.

Then in 1966 came the YZip, which was extra strong and durable, designed specifically for jeans. YKK simultaneously developed a machine that could incorporate the YZip into the rest of the jean-stitching process, making it even more convenient for clothing manufacturers.

Having a solid reputation built on the quality of its product, coupled with its global presence and ability to deliver, has made YKK unbeatable within the manufacturing and retail sector. Outside, and to the general consumer, however, it remains an unsung hero.