

Duluth Trading Co. Brings  
Its Down-to-Earth Mentality  
Back Home to Where It Began

# Welcome Back



BY PAUL NICOLAUS

For a business proudly bearing the name of Duluth Trading Co., opening a store in Duluth will serve as a fitting homecoming. The catalog and online retailer has begun to solidify its brick-and-mortar presence in recent years.

The company's masterpiece (or at least the piece of clothing that first garnered major attention) is the Longtail T Shirt that, upon its introduction in 2002, solved the age old "plumber's butt" conundrum. And their "Buck Naked" clothing provides moisture wicking technology that makes it feel "like you aren't wearing any underwear at all."

If you're unfamiliar with Duluth Trading Co., by now you're likely beginning to realize that this business has a sense of humor running through its veins and its clothing lines. And according to Duluth Store Manager Mead Bradley, you will see that sense of humor on the sales floor as well.

### LOCAL VIBE

During the hiring process there was an effort to find employees who could reflect the company's friendly, fun nature, Bradley noted. "You'll get great service from great local people," he said. "The company really does take care of its people and expects that we take great care of our customers. It's kind of an old-school philosophy that is hard to find these days."

*"You'll get great service from great local people. The company...expects that we take great care of our customers."*

- DULUTH STORE MANAGER MEAD BRADLEY



**DRY ON THE FLY™  
CARGO PANTS.**



With the new store slated to open in mid-May, customers can expect to find plenty more than a shared laugh, and it all starts before you even walk through the doors. The century-old building and former auto dealership – located at 300 E. Superior St. – sports a brick façade and a character that aligns nicely with the company’s rugged nature.

Upon entering, the structure’s industrial guts are revealed. “It falls in line with how the company has an interest in things that are unique, yet functional,” Bradley said, “and the building itself just has a cool feeling about it.”

Kraus-Anderson Construction Co. has been involved as the store takes on its new look, serving as a carpentry subcontractor on the remodeling. “We demolished out the existing space, which was a former office, and then have been involved with all the drywall – both the framing and the hanging of it,” said Jonathan Ballmer, project manager. Kraus-Anderson also installed all the doors, frames and hardware as well as all the toilet accessories. “It’s been a great opportunity for us to be involved,” he added.

Each Duluth Trading Co. store has a theme that reflects the local area. Duluth’s decor, fittingly, will riff on the area’s ties to the nautical world. “It will reflect the shipping that we’ll be able to see right out the windows of the store,” Bradley said.

Historical pictures of the city will line the walls, and one section of the store will be devoted entirely to the company’s famous Fire Hose pants and Ballroom jeans, accentuated by an eye-catching sign. There will

**“It’s been a great opportunity for us to be involved.”**

– JONATHAN BALLMER,  
KRAUS-ANDERSON CONSTRUCTION CO.

also be a hospitality area where customers can sit down and read some of the history behind both the company and Duluth itself while sipping on complimentary coffee or water.

Computer kiosks will allow customers to search for and order items. This aspect of the shopping experience may turn into a major convenience for tourists who would like to purchase products, but have simply run out of room in suitcases or bags, Bradley explained. “If they’re visiting Duluth from Arizona, for example, and don’t want to purchase the items and

carry them along, they will be able to go on the computer terminal and have it shipped to their home for free,” he said.

There are plenty of locals excited to take advantage of Duluth Trading Co.’s physical presence as well, including Wayne Elmer, a pulmonary and critical care physician at nearby St. Luke’s Hospital who has become a devoted customer in recent years.

While a funny ad initially grabbed his attention, Elmer says it’s the product itself that keeps him coming back. “It’s quality stuff, it’s well manufactured,

it’s kind of heavy-duty,” he said. “It’s also got a classic styling, so it’s not going to look dated in a year or two.”

Elmer also sees the benefits of the clothing’s durability, since he tends to wear it while hunting or enjoying the great outdoors. “It’s more expensive than some of the things you’re going to buy in the big box stores, but I see it as a good value,” he said. “I don’t like to buy new clothing every year. I’ll wear it until it wears out, and I don’t think Duluth Trading Co. stuff is going to wear out anytime soon.”

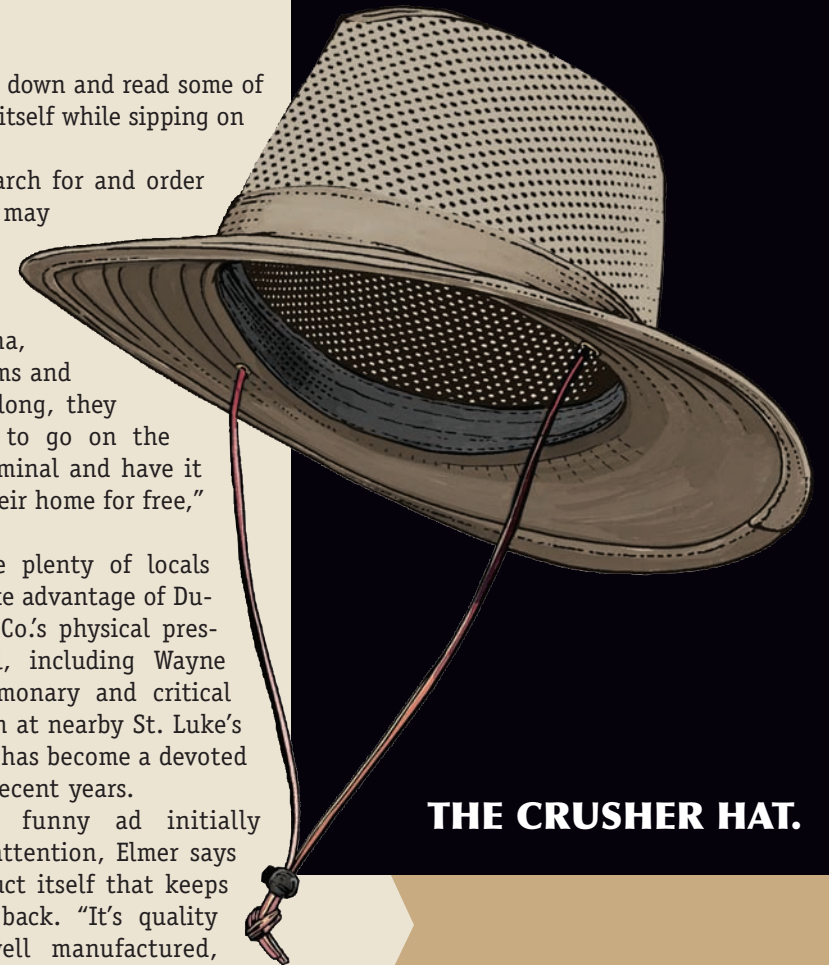
Even though Elmer tends to handle most of his shopping online, he’s excited that he will now have the opportunity to shop at the store as well. “I was really psyched to hear that they were coming to Duluth, because with some things it’s just nice to be able to try it on,” he said.

**CREATIVE CATALOGUES**

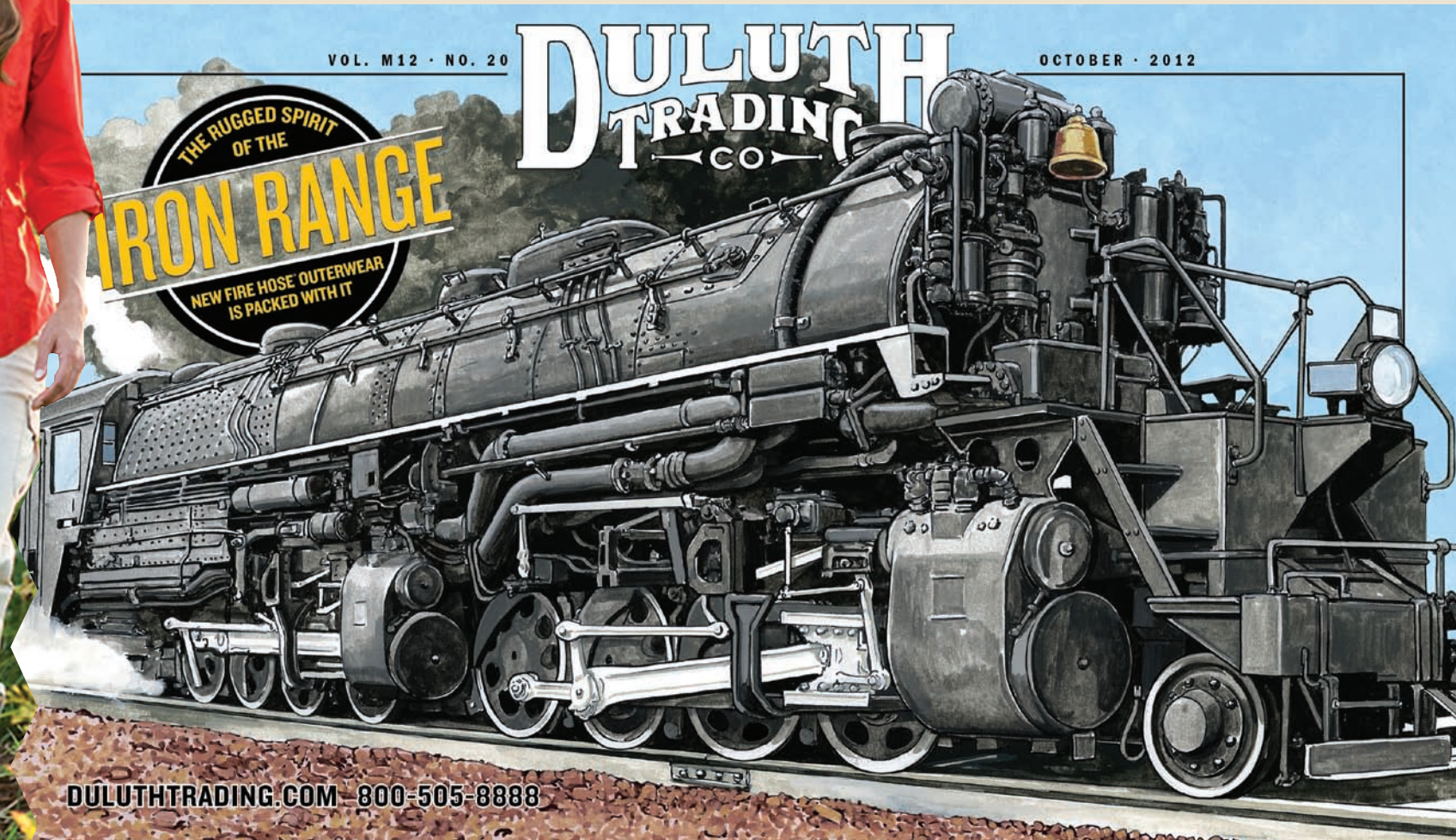
That ability to walk into a Duluth Trading Co. store is a relatively new development in a company history that involves years of brand building through catalog and online sales.

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– DULUTH CUSTOMER  
WAYNE ELMER



**THE CRUSHER HAT.**







In fact, one of the company's creative flairs and hallmarks can be found within the pages of its catalogs. The man who invented that eye-catching style is Rick Kollath of Kollath Graphic Design in Duluth, who's been behind the distinctive illustrations since the catalog's inception more than 20 years ago. "From a marketing point of view, it's pretty cool to have a catalog that's unique," he said. "No catalog looks like this."

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— RICK KOLLATH,  
KOLLATH GRAPHIC DESIGN

About 25 years ago, brothers and company founders Bob and Dave Fierek (who were also tradesmen who lived in Duluth's Morgan Park neighborhood) invented the Bucket Boss – a nylon sleeve with pockets that created an inexpensive, convenient way to hold tools at a job site. That's when their young company, called Portable Products, emerged. The company moved to St. Paul and was later renamed the Duluth Trading Co. In 1991, the Fiereks recruited Kollath to bring their first catalog to life with his inventive artwork.

The company was later sold to Fiskars Consumer Products in 1996. It was sold again in 2001 to Steve Schlecht, its chief executive officer, who moved it to Belleville, Wis., where the company's headquarters, warehouse and call center remain.

Despite the ownership changes and related moves, Kollath and his illustrations have continued to remain a key ingredient in Duluth Trading Co.'s quirky style. And while these drawings initially took center stage over product photographs (mainly to save on cash), as the years went on they became a part of the company that was worth purposely holding onto.

"It's something that from a heritage perspective we feel not only keeps our tradition alive in terms of how we

present product to the customer, but it also sets us apart from others," said Duluth Trading Co. President Stephanie Pugliese. "And there's something very artistic and very craftsman or artisan-like in an illustrated website or catalog that I think really reflects how we go about creating the product."

Although Kollath no longer handles the design work, he now guides an entire team of artists while continuing to remain the chief catalog product illustrator. As a Duluth resident and longtime creative force behind Duluth Trading Co., he has his own take on how the products align with the city's culture: "They sell very practical stuff, and I think Duluth, if anything, has very practical minded people," he said. "They sell clothes for people like us."

Knowing the company is preparing to set up within the downtown area, Kollath sees this addition as part of an exciting movement that will help bolster the overall atmosphere downtown, and Bradley agrees. "The downtown area is undergoing rejuvenation," he said, "and I think this store is going to be a huge piece of that."

Elmer also views this addition as part of a larger positive movement. "As a Duluth resident, you like to see an up and coming company like that move into Duluth, because I've got to believe it's going to be good for the local economy," he said. "I just see it as another big step in the right direction for the development of the downtown Duluth area."

Elmer cited the decision by maurices to keep company headquarters in downtown Duluth as another example of an evolving, progressive business climate. "I think there are some real positive corporate developments that are going into downtown that will help the tax base and bring more corporate traffic into downtown," he said. "And hopefully the rising tide will help to lift all the boats."

#### **INVENTIVE SPIRIT**

As Duluth Trading Co. searched for the location of its newest store, the decision to come home to Duluth was readily apparent. "What's more natural than bringing a store back to the town where it all started?" asked Pugliese, explaining that the community seems to embody the same kind of rugged outdoorsman spirit and can-do attitude that's at the heart of the business.

"We have a great sense of place in Duluth, Minnesota," Pugliese added. "There is an image of hardworking, salt-of-the-earth people that value jobs well done in the Duluth community, and to come back and literally now be part of that community is exciting for us."



Duluth Store Manager Mead Bradley



Sales Associates Eva Sevastiades (left) and Karen Olson-Nyberg.



Sales Associates Ben Jesberg (left) and Juan Romero.



Interior view of the Duluth store, slated to open in mid-May.





## COOLPLUS ACTION SHIRT

For Elmer, it's also been encouraging to see the company get involved locally. "The fact that they were willing to get out and sponsor an event like the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon is a big plus from my point of view, because we need that kind of support here in the community," he said.

As the company prepares to open its doors to Duluth area residents and visitors, it is in the midst of impressive growth, racking up a double-digit increase in sales over the past several years and adding another building to its Belleville headquarters to accommodate all of its new employees.

"When we are working together or bringing new talent onto the team, we are always looking for those men and women that not only are skilled at their individual crafts – meaning copywriting, for example, or product development – but that also very much relate to our customers, and are doing things very much like what our customers are doing," Pugliese said. "It's a fun, good place to work and that's really important to us."

As Pugliese and the company look ahead, part of the excitement the future holds is the potential to better connect with the female population. "We have a wonderful brand that has resonated for a long time with male customers predominantly, and we're finding that more and more our women's business continues to grow," she said.


There are plenty of potential female customers who are living the same sort of lifestyle Duluth Trading Co. has effectively targeted for years. "There are a lot of women out there that we can reach out to in order to make their life a little bit better or a little bit easier," Pugliese said. "We're very proud of what we do because of what we can give our customers. If we can create solutions and be innovative and think there's got to be a better way,

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– DULUTH TRADING CO. PRESIDENT STEPHANIE PUGLIESE

season after season and year after year, that's what gets us charged up."

Although there are ideas for continued improvement in place, Pugliese already feels encouraged by what she sees. "What we're finding is just a continued acceptance not only of the great solution-based product that we offer, but also our culture and the brand," she explained. "The fact that we continue to have really wonderful reception by new people every year gets me more and more excited about the prospects of the brand long-term."

As the city of Duluth welcomes Duluth Trading Co. back home, the imaginative outlook that started it all lives on in the company's constant desire to get creative in order to tackle everyday problems. "We keep looking for solutions for our customers," Pugliese says, "so really, that spirit has never gone away." 

► Paul Nicolaus is a freelance writer and editor.



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