

RIRI

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ZIP



“If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it”. This aphorism by Albert Einstein was taken quite seriously by some inventors. The question then arose: how can you get patent offices and investors to believe in the potential of a far-fetched idea? Here's an example from the final decade of the 19th century: at that time people fastened their garments by tying, buttoning or knotting. Then, suddenly, somebody had a bright idea – which made things easier! – but its explanation was complicated: “I have invented a new device for fastening which can be used an unlimited number of times. It consists of two lateral elements, which you can imagine as two jaws”.

Absurd! During the ‘Chicago World's Columbian Exposition’ in 1893, an exhibition to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus, the engineer and inventor Withcomb L. Judson submitted his patent called ‘Clasp Locker’, possibly the first in the world for a zip. Even though it never became successful on the market, its invention can be considered a watershed in terms of the origin of the modern-day zip.



“Never give up: regardless of how far-fetched it may sound, keep looking for the perfect fastening device!”. This is what Mr Judson's successors used to say, without becoming any more successful though... up until the arrival of one Mr Sundback who – after a few initial uncertainties – reached the intended goal: in 1913 the American engineer was awarded a US patent for his “Hookless Fastener system”. That was how the first modern zip was born, which could be used not just on shoes and tobacco-pouches, like its earlier versions, but – and this was the real game-changer – also for garments.



In 1924 Gideon Sundback travelled to Sankt Gallen in the hope of launching his invention on the European market, and there he met a man who immediately became aware of its potential: the Swiss entrepreneur and lawyer Martin Othmar Winterhalter. He bought the patent for Europe, thus becoming, according to the newspaper NZZ, “the (uncrowned) king of zippers”. Winterhalter owed this recognition not just to his business skills, in fact he was also a clever inventor who realised that the “Hookless Fastener” might not be the ultimate goal in terms of zips. On the contrary: he felt the need to further enhance the fastening system devised by Mr Sundback.

The new fastening system designed by Mr Winterhalter consisted of concave and convex elements: Rippe+Rille=Riri! That is how the brand name originated.

In 1936 the company Riri was established in Mendrisio, in the southern part of Ticino, starting a history of great achievements: Riri zippers were actually the first to be assembled on a large scale, with amounts soon destined to increase even further, thanks to a booming demand.

The Riri zip by Mr Winterhalter has been developed since then: on the one hand there is a high-tech line for sports apparel and technical equipment; on the other side there is a top-of-the-range line for key players in the sector of fashion, accessories, outdoor and denim clothing. In 2003 the Swiss team Alinghi won the America's Cup wearing clothes fitted with Riri zippers from the Storm line, waterproof and resistant to UV rays. After successfully passing this demanding 'test', the Storm zip received the Swiss Technology Award in 2004.



Major brands in the fashion sector, including Dolce & Gabbana, Prada and Tommy Hilfiger, choose the zips created by Riri for their collections. The Swiss company's motto is "In a world dominated by conformity, we prefer to be unique and authentic".

Alan Kirk, at the time CEO of the American fashion brand Filson, in an interview in 2001 to the magazine Fortune, said that "Riri is on the same level as Porsche in the zipper industry". And Livio Cossutti, then president of the Riri Group, in 2005 said that "innovation is part of Riri's DNA".

Manufacturing plants: Mendrisio (CH), Tirano (IT), Padova (IT), Palazzolo sull'Oglio (IT). Annual production capacity: about 10,000 km of zips.

Employees: approximately 740

Turnover in 2017: € 92 million.

Branches: France, USA, Hong Kong, China, South Korea.

The Riri Group includes the brands Cobrax, with headquarters in Padua (market leader in button and rivet manufacturing for the luxury and denim sectors), and Meras, with headquarters in Tirano (manufacturing of Nylon and unpolished metal zippers for clothing).