

## Haspel to Build Lifestyle Brand

Joint venture with Neema and Graj + Gustavsen aims to turn name known for suits into multi-category label

BY BRENNER THOMAS

**NEW YORK** – Haspel, approaching its 100th anniversary, has inked a deal with Graj + Gustavsen and Neema Worldwide to form a new company tasked with turning the heritage clothing label, known for popularizing the seersucker suit, into a lifestyle brand.

Detailed exclusively to DNR, the joint venture, called Haspel Worldwide, will work to leverage the Haspel name across a number of categories over the next 12 months, including men's furnishings, accessories and sportswear, as well as separate children's, home and women's collections.

"We've been planning this for 100 years," said Laurie Haspel Aronson, owner of the Haspel trademark and great-granddaughter of the label's founder. "We're ready to build this brand," Jim Ammeen, president of Neema Worldwide, will serve as the new company's manager and will head up talks with potential licensees. Ammeen, whose firm has been making Haspel tailored clothing under license since 1998, has a long-standing relationship with the family, as well as with Simon Graj, principle of Graj + Gustavsen. The marketing firm will head up the creative positioning for the venture. Both Neema and G+G have equity stakes in the venture. The parties will begin courting retailers and potential licensees next month, focusing on developing products that, according to Graj, reflect Haspel's "affluent and laid-back attitude."

Graj wouldn't say if any preliminary conversations with partners had taken place, and there's no timeline for launch of the new Haspel products. But Neema has plans to beef up Haspel's tailored clothing collection for next spring with a new line of premium suits as well as a younger, slimmer silhouette that will either be folded in the current collection or marketed under a separate contemporary label.

The venture marks the next page for a storied, if underutilized, brand that was only repurchased by the family 11 years ago. Haspel was founded in 1909

by Joseph Haspel Sr., who decided to turn the seersucker used commonly for workwear into a suit. They eventually became a staple of Ivy Leaguers' summerwear and were worn by President Roosevelt and Cary Grant alike.

But the family sold Haspel in 1977 and as it changed hands a number of times, the brand faded. Twenty years later, Aronson's father bought the brand back and today Haspel is sold in nearly 500 specialty department stores around the country, including Macy's and Nordstrom. But Aronson said the brand's centennial prompted her to think bigger. "We've always known Haspel is more of a lifestyle brand," she said. "But now we are ready to move forward."

Aronson, a Baton Rouge resident, runs a large gun distributor in addition to Haspel and often travels the country with both firearms and fabric swatches. "Each industry has quite a unique atmosphere, but I love them both," she said in a winning Southern lilt that sheds some light on how she is able to sell both guns and blazers in the same afternoon.

Such details are rife in the Haspel story, and are part of the brand's appeal. One of the label's most-told tales is of Joseph Haspel Sr., who in the 1950s demonstrated his new wash-and-wear suit by wearing one into the ocean. He took it off, let it dry and wore it to a party that night.

The Haspel name has proven itself equally resilient. Now Aronson and company are hopeful those stories will help the brand connect to a wider audience.

