March 2009

Smashing Young Lads

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2009/iss3/10

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SMASHING YOUNG LADS
"I went to the Iowa State Fair and all I got was Type-2 Diabetes."

So reads just one of many Iowa-related slogans that appear on T-shirts from SMASH, an upcoming big-name company in Des Moines' East Village. The people at SMASH will design you a snappy T-shirt, screen print it, then make you a kick-ass Web site—if you can get past their completely informal attitude and off-the-wall sense of humor.

By Jenna Miller  Photo by Justin Meyer
The company has four areas of service: wholesale, retail, custom screen printing and Web design. During the past year and a half, its size has more than doubled, causing head boy Mike Draper to ask two of his friends to join him at the store as full-time employees.

Draper, 26, is originally from Van Meter, Iowa. He has a history degree from Penn State, but no formal business training. Nevertheless, Draper incorporates his devil-may-care sense of humor into anything and everything produced under the name SMASH.

Garrett Cornelison, 26, heads the custom screen printing department. Cornelison is one of four full-time employees at SMASH, and some of the witty slogans for sale on the racks are his brainchildren, although he won't take credit for thinking up anything specific.

"Usually it's something overheard in the office. Sometimes someone will throw something out, and we'll be like, 'That would actually be a pretty good shirt.' Or we'll be out drinking, and we'll come up with a few. We don't really have a strict process for it."

That being said, SMASH's T-shirt slogans vary from vaguely ironic to hilarious.

"A while back, we decided that we wanted to make SMASH identifiable not necessarily by putting 'SMASH' on the shirts, but by having an identifiable font," Cornelison said. "Beyond that, we still have fun with other things, like the 1989 Dodge Omni Hatchback Turbo.

"It's sort of our logo. Everyone else gets a symbol. Abercrombie and Fitch gets a moose—they just picked a moose. American Eagle gets an eagle. Now a 1989 Dodge Omni Hatchback Turbo, nobody has that."

Indeed, a shrieking-pink print of the 1989 Dodge Omni Hatchback Turbo, which Cornelison says is one of the fastest cars produced in the '80s, is featured on several T-shirts for both men and women.

Further proof of the simultaneous genius and insanity of the crew is evident in their newer creations.

"We are just coming out with a new home school line, for all the homeschooled kids. 'Home Sweet Home School,' 'Home School High!'... Justin was homeschooled, so out of that came the brand. They have a mascot now. It's the flying giraffe/unicorn hybrid.


As for the T-shirts that poke fun at Iowa or play on Des Moines' reputation among larger cities (see "Des Moines: Hell Yes!" and "Don't Meth with Iowa"), the people at SMASH assume that their customers have a sense of humor.

"It's amazing how much pride people have in this state," said Cornelison. "We're certainly going for a younger audience with that, but it's a younger audience that thinks, that's educated. Middle-aged people come in here too, though. It's just so widespread. We have a target, but we miss it every time."

He said the majority of Iowa-shirt appreciators enjoy their nostalgia.

"It turns out there are a lot of people who used to live in Iowa, who don't live in Iowa anymore. They love being able to sport an Iowa shirt where they live now. It's kitschy, kind of like a John Deere shirt."

Along with T-shirts, sweatpants and hoodies, SMASH sells various knick-knacks like the popular smoking mittens, made by SuckUK, featuring a metal cutout to "perfectly fit your cigarette." Coffee-table books not unlike the ones you'd see at an Urban Outfitters are piled between a pair of SMASH-stenciled sofas.

The store itself is often mistaken for a work in progress, said Cornelison. Until Draper bought the space next door and personally ripped out the wall dividing the two, SMASH operated in a store half its current size. What used to be a bathroom is transformed into a dressing room complete with screen printed shower curtain. The raw insulation droops out from between the rafters. The walls are poorly painted, but the mess combined with neat rows of T-shirts on minimalist metal racks somehow makes for an accurate reflection of what the SMASH lifestyle is all about.

Although the marvels in the retail section could probably hold off the average customer for at least half an hour, only about 20 percent of gross profit comes from pre-made T-shirt sales.

Cornelison says half the store's profit comes from the custom design work done in the back room by him and three part-time assistant printers.

Cornelison finds it easy to explain SMASH's popularity.

"There are some [screen printing] places in Des Moines, but they're out of their garage, and they're not very trustworthy," he said.

"A lot of people have bad luck with them. They're like, 'Oh, we used to use this one guy, but he never got anything done on time, and he didn't have an e-mail address so... You know, that sort of thing. Or there are huge screen printing places, like Broken Arrow, that service a whole different client. We filled in the middle gap."

In May, another person will join the crew full-time to help Cornelison handle the skyrocketing customs department.

Since the work force at SMASH has grown to four full-timers, the new manager-slash-wholesaler Draper has had time to step back and consider an organized business plan for the store. He's stopped selling local crafters' wares consignment-style in favor of a more singular image.

"We've focused a little bit more on our own brand," said Cornelison.

Whatever their goal, lack of collaboration doesn't mean lack of variety.

Jen Morrow, 28, who manages the retail and buying sector of the company, aims to ensure customer satisfaction.

"I want to make the retail section of the store a real destination for a full outfit," she said. "Right now, we have sweatpants to go with your T-shirt, but we don't have a lot of stuff."
Cornelison agrees.

"We're trying to grow out of our T-shirt thing. I mean, we're covering up our torsos, but people are walking around without pants on. If you get all your stuff from SMASH, you're probably on somebody's list. You probably can't go within 2,000 feet of a school."

Shoes are also on the list of future additions to the store's inventory.

Despite the responsibilities that come with popularity, the SMASH staff's demeanor has remained remarkably consistent: people still can't believe that the unshaven dude behind the desk is the person handling their 5,000-piece order.

"We keep an informal tone for our own good. We don't want to blow a ton of smoke up our own ass," Draper said. "It's who we are. No sense in pretending."

He said a majority of people considers the casual atmosphere "refreshing" and lets the high-quality products of the crew's hard work speak for themselves.

In this vein, SMASH is a manifestation of Draper's experience in life. He "didn't make a big deal" about college but has learned to appreciate the payoff of persistent effort.

"I'm used to people thinking that I kind of loaf along," he said.

Anyone who was present at the conception of SMASH, however, knows that Draper does everything but "loaf."

"When I started, I would easily clear 90 hours a week. I did 80 to 90 hours per week, six or seven days a week, for over a year."

Since then, he's knocked his weekly hours down to a modest 50.

Aside from dogged dedication to the growth and prosperity of his store, Draper credits the friendly and encouraging disposition of the Des Moines business community with his success.

"Des Moines in general is an extremely supportive city. You get all the press you want. People are positive about your success. They want to help. Especially in the art community, there is more of an emphasis on 'nice' than 'cool.'"

"I didn't know all of this when I started, but looking back, all that stuff has made it a lot easier to run a company here. Philly may have had more people and a more developed alternative scene, but that just means the competition is fierce and rents are high."

Something that helped convince Cornelison to come aboard SMASH was the lack of competition in the screen printing business in Iowa.

"For the size of Des Moines, it's grossly underserved," said Cornelison.

"There's a lot to be said for getting out of town for a while. Then you can see the opportunity back home, and you're like, 'Wow, why couldn't somebody just do this in Des Moines and make a truckload of money?'"

SMASH is also well-connected with other creative businesses in the area, and it's not by accident. The store's walls are used to showcase local artists' work, which is switched out every two months. They are currently booked until mid-2010.

"Most of our friends are other business owners and employees downtown," said Draper. He established friendships with some of the smaller businesses by designing logos and Web sites for them.

"Out East, it was a lot of pretentious kids trying to out-alternative each other, looking for deep meaning in stuff done by someone without a lot of talent, and all of them expected to make it really big one day. Here the art community is way more down-to-earth and easy to work with, and because of that, I think it makes a lot of better artwork."

The company is also involved in the local music scene. Draper printed some of his first shirts in 2005 for local bands like The Nadai, The Envy Corps and the Josh Davis Band.

A few years ago, Cornelison created the semi-annual SMASH-sponsored event, "Dance Party USA," at neighboring venue The Vaudeville Mews.

"Everybody was always like, 'There's no place to dance in Des Moines!'" he said.

The most recent Dance Party USA event was for New Year's Eve 2009.

"I think we had 200 people," said Cornelison. "In the Mews, that's like wall to wall. It was a blast."

These community events, which give SMASH what Draper calls "local control," are what really make SMASH successful, he said. A business philosophy based on community support makes it difficult to plan new stores outside of Des Moines, but a company that in three years went from $60,000 to $700,000 in annual sales can hardly be expected to stay put.

"We'll probably open another store in Iowa City in late 2010. That will be the big experiment, if a chain can be a chain, but still have local appeal and roots," he said. "The SMASH in Iowa City will have its own art openings and parties and will try to connect with the community as much as possible."

Draper said he also plans on buying out more space in Des Moines to accommodate growing demand for custom work.

"We're hoping to take the printing and design side of the company into more of a 'marketing' field. We'll start doing branding projects for companies. We'll be somewhere between an ad agency, a design firm and a printing shop. We've had a lot of success in that so far, so we'll try to keep it going."

Wherever the new stores are located, Draper can be sure his T-shirts are being worn by Iowa enthusiasts all over the country, and that his business will have a base of loyal customers as long as it's based in Des Moines. Maybe Draper himself put it best when he described SMASH's success:

"People in Des Moines feel like they own a part of the store because they know everyone who works here and because the store is really only marketed to them. It gives them something to tell people from out of state."