

LOVE THE MADNESS

Moosejaw Mountaineering's zany brand marketing creates a loyal customer community

By Sarika Dani

Moosejaw Mountaineering has an off-the-wall marketing strategy that cuts through the retail advertising din with a brand personality that's difficult to dislike. The Madison Heights, Mich.-based outdoor-goods retailer bypasses the solemn marketing strategies employed by most of its competitors. Instead, it focuses on building a community of shoppers loyal to both the brand and the culture behind it.

"Our marketing is really a reflection of our personalities and our age," said Robert Wolfe, the 34-year-old co-founder and president of Moosejaw. Wolfe, a former wilderness guide who started the company at age 21 along with a fellow recent college graduate, explained, "Our goal is to be as different as possible."

The differences are reflected in its product mix, which currently includes Moosejaw "tattoos," which bear the irrelevant image of a stapler, and in its Web site and mail-order catalog, where random, often irreverent captions are paired with photos of adventures clad in outdoor gear.

Wolfe's favorite marketing tactic—and the one he believes most effective—is a Web site feature called "Today's Remarks." Authored by a character called Trapper, the blog-like postings include daily trivia questions, but rarely discuss Moosejaw Merchandise.

"We get hundreds of responses daily with comments on the idiocy of the remarks, to relate a similar story, or to answer the trivia question," said Wolfe. "To get people to proactively e-mail you every day is amazing."

Moosejaw operates six retail stores in Michigan and Illinois. When the first store opened in 1992, the company also launched its own Moosejaw-branded apparel, which is now its best-selling line. According to Wolfe, people buy the logo clothing and accessories in order to be part of the Moosejaw culture, not because of the quality of the goods.

"We try to communicate on a level that's not just product-oriented," Wolfe said. "We're geared to more a fashion-oriented user—we're not talking about climbing and backpacking all the time. A lot of people in the outdoor industry think you lose the hard-core customer."

But we are so over-the-top and self-deprecating that the hard-core customer gets a kick out of it.”

While Moosejaw carries the same high-performance brands as REI—such as Acr Teryx and the North Face—Wolfe admitted that the competitor “dominates the business. Really, you’ve got to sell the dream,” he said. “A lot of the stuff we sell is a commodity product; you can buy it anywhere. So we are trying to create loyalty in the madness, as with reward points, to set us apart from the competitors.”

Moosejaw created its reward points program, where shoppers earn an instant 10% back on in-store and on-line purchases, in response to REI’s rewards program.

For two years, Moosejaw employed a marketing firm, but Wolfe realized that much of the creative was coming from Moosejaw itself. This year, the company reverted to an in-house marketing strategy. With 55% of last year’s revenues derived from on-line sales, and closer to 65% expected this year, Moosejaw’s whimsical e-commerce site has become a key tool in driving the business. Through features such as live chat for gear questions, a “Dating Girl” Q & A section and a “decent story contest,” Moosejaw solicits customer response and interaction in a variety of ways.

The company also uses traditional marketing methods, such as newspaper ads (but “with an idiotic twist,” Wolfe added) and catalog mailings. Wolfe said the catalogs have been most effective of the more traditional methods.