

SMALL BUSINESS

Going from one van to tops in T's

By Val Previsch
Enquirer contributor

Back in the early 1990s, a handful of college buddies roamed the country in an old van selling T-shirts at Grateful Dead concerts and making enough money to survive.

The small company they formed, Ripple Junction, has grown over the past 19 years to become one of the largest wholesalers of licensed T-shirts in the world, selling millions of shirts through retailers such as Target, Wal-Mart, Macy's, Kohl's and Old Navy.

While the company has come a long way from its roots in the back of a van nicknamed The Denterprise, the

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corporate offices in Sycamore Township still have a relaxed, laid-back vibe.

And, of course, all 43 employees wear T-shirts to work.

"It's not required, but it's looked on very favorably," vice president Scott Andersen says.

Andersen met original founder and president Neil Hoynes, who grew up in West Chester, at a New Orleans jazz festival in 1993 during one of Hoynes' cross-country selling trips. The two still run the company today, producing top sellers off classic movies such as "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" and "The Goonies," and TV shows such as "Seinfeld" and "The Big Bang Theory."

Andersen and Hoynes recently launched their newest venture, a philanthropic effort meant to attract prosperous, socially conscious women.

Branded under the name Project Iris, these shirts are a departure from the usual quirky styles. They feature floral and nature-inspired graphics instead of funky pop culture images.

But the biggest difference is that 5 percent of sales goes to the World Food Program USA to provide nutritious meals to women and children in developing countries.

"We have young kids, and we feel fortunate," Andersen says. "So we wanted to help those in need."

Launched last October on World Food Day, Project Iris T-shirts are sold primarily in upscale resorts and spas. They're targeted at women who consider fashion, fitness and social consciousness to be part of their lifestyles.

Roughly 120 outlets around the country sell the shirts. Andersen says he's been pleased with the results so far, although he declined to reveal figures. Eventually, the company plans to add items such as pants and wraps to the line.

"We want to make this a lifestyle apparel brand," says Steve Loring, the line's marketing director. "We want Project Iris to be associated with good causes."

Chris Mann, owner of Woodhouse Day Spa in Montgomery, started carrying the shirts in January.

"They've been popular," he says. "The design is unique and they are very earthy, which fits well with our vibe at the spa. I think customers also like the fact that they give back, which is noted right on the tag." Each shirt also comes with a bracelet that shows support for the World Food Program.

Ripple Junction's history is a retail-to-wholesale tale. It started with a couple of Cincinnati stores during the late '90s that were operated under the name Third Stone.

By 2000, however, the company had closed its retail stores and was focusing solely on its wholesale licensing business. Ripple Junction buys licensed images from businesses such as movie and TV production companies, then imprints T-shirts with the images and sells them.

Celebrities including Chad Ochocinco and Mark Wahlberg have appeared on TV sporting company designs, and Ripple Junction regularly works with licenses from big hitters like Warner Brothers, Universal Studios and Cartoon Network.

Ripple Junction has a reputation for being ahead of the trend curve, says Mike Tkach, an associate buyer

for menswear with Urban Outfitters in Philadelphia.

"They come to you first with new ideas," Tkach says. "The licensing is on-point to the pop culture of the moment. They are one step ahead."

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Ripple Junction

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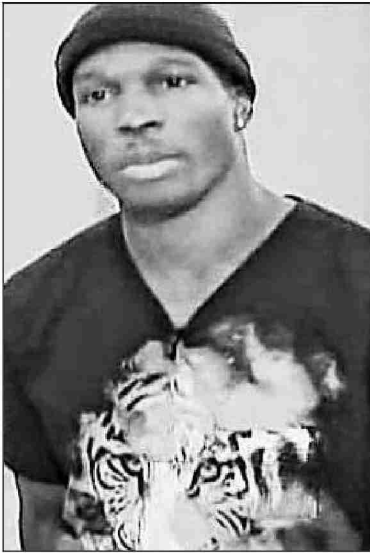
Website: www.ripplejunction.com, www.projectiris.com

Employees: 43

Owners: Neil Hoynes and Scott Andersen

Notable: T-shirts conjuring nostalgia and personal messages have helped Ripple Junction be named one of the world's top licensees four years in a row by License Magazine.





Provided

Chad Ochocinco wore a Bengal tiger T-shirt made by Ripple Junction on "Dancing with the Stars."



The Enquirer/Amie Dworecki

At Ripple Junction headquarters in Sycamore Township, Neil Hoynes (left), president, and Scott Andersen, vice president, show off a couple of their pop-culture trendy designs and catch-phrase T-shirts.