

Comet Skateboards: It's a Smooth Ride

Jason Salfi loves skateboarding. And that is how many small businesses begin. The founder has a passion for something—whether it's cooking or surfing or creating video games—and decides to turn it into a business. For Salfi, it's skateboarding. The company, now in business for more than a decade, is Comet Skateboards. When Salfi graduated from Cornell University, he did what many recent graduates do—he headed west. He lived on a boat off the coast of California. He partnered with a friend and together they tinkered around with making skateboards, which they sold to other skateboard fans in their circle of friends. But Salfi wanted something more. He wanted to find a better way to make skateboards and a way to support his newly started family. “Back then, skateboards were made with seven layers of maple and sprayed with a lacquer-based coating,” he recalls. “Skateboards were accounting for 35 to 40 percent of the natural maple being harvested each year.” Salfi loved skateboarding, but he didn't like the way boards were made. He believed that a skateboard could be built with more environmentally sustainable processes and materials. “I wanted to start a company that would make an impression on people and build an awareness around the use of natural resources,” Salfi says.

Not long after he launched Comet Skateboards, Salfi moved his company and his family back east to Ithaca, New York. There, he partnered with e2e Materials, a small start-up out of Cornell. The firm specializes in regionally sourced bio-composite materials; they manufacture their own soy-based resin and bio-composites that Salfi describes as “incredibly strong and biodegradable.” The formula was exactly what Salfi was looking for. He set up shop and hired several employees, including Bob Rossi, now head of Web development for Comet and president of the Green Resource Hub, an organization that focuses on helping businesses to practise sustainability.

Rossi is impressed with Salfi's total commitment to finding the best way to make his products, even if it meant moving across the country. “To move your business into the opportunity, to create a greener product, that is pretty impressive to me... There's a lot of green-washing out there,” says Rossi. He knows the difference. Comet goes much farther than simply purchasing e2e's materials; the firm has adopted a closed-loop manufacturing process, which means that it reduces or eliminates waste by examining the life cycle of all the materials used in its manufacturing process.

It might seem like Salfi and Rossi aren't cut from the same cloth as the previous generation of skateboarders—they're busy doing good things for the environment and for their community instead of rolling along the fringes of society like the original bad-boy image of skateboarding. But Salfi remains true to his skateboarding background (though Rossi admits to being new to the sport). Comet's boards have names like The Voodoo Doll and Shred City. They are built for specialists who prefer downhill, or freeriding. Riders are invited to contribute ideas for the shapes, graphics, and names of new boards. Comet has found a way to increase profit potential by using green materials. Its efforts have led to praise from both business bloggers and committed skateboarding bloggers. Salfi seems to have found a way to blend doing good with doing good business—in a sport that was once far from the mainstream.

Salfi hopes that Comet Skateboards will serve as an example of a small business that can make a big difference—while making products that provide fun. “We look at everything we do through the lens of how we can create a model that people can replicate in the future,” he says. Salfi observes proudly that although Comet has only been in Ithaca for a few years, the company has a 100-percent retention rate of employees. He wants Comet to be a company that is known for its positive working environment, a place where people can develop long-term careers.

“We know that in the grand scheme of things, we’re a small company, but through the many means of getting the message out—the Internet, video, music, and photography—we can actually have a broad footprint and make the idea of sustainability and social justice appealing to a broader market,” predicts Salfi. While the bottom line—turning a profit—is vital to Comet’s survival and growth, Salfi believes that this new way of doing business is more important in the long run. “We like to think we’re creating a blueprint for the kind of company that will be around for 100 or 200 years,” he muses. Then the skateboarder emerges. With a grin Salfi adds, “At the end of the day we’re making skateboards, and we don’t want to bum anybody out.”

Questions for Critical Thinking

1. In which category, or categories, does Jason Salfi fit as an entrepreneur? Why? Give examples.
2. Salfi notes that the use of information technology—part of the environment for entrepreneurs—can help Comet Skateboards reach a broader audience. Can you identify any population and economic trends that might provide opportunities for Comet Skateboard’s growth as a business?
3. Which traditional characteristics of entrepreneurs best describe Jason Salfi? Why?
4. As Comet Skateboards reaches the next level of growth, where might the firm have the best chance of obtaining further financing? Why?

Sources: Comet Skateboards website, <http://www.cometskateboards.com>, accessed August 20, 2010; “GOOD Products,” Halogen TV, <http://www.halogentv.com>, accessed August 20, 2010; Nadia Hosni, “Triple Bottom Line: Comet Skateboards,” *Tonic*, April 27, 2010, <http://www.tonic.com>.