

No coasting for this skateboard firm



Entrepreneur finds his online store aimed at girls hits the mark. But he's still struggling to get skate-shop buyers to carry his products.

By Cyndia Zwahlen, Special to The Times
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Pink skateboards decked out with black skulls and crossed swords are flying off the online store shelves of Cool Girl Skateboards of Huntington Beach. But when it comes to the male-dominated world of bricks-and-mortar skate shops, the boards are often hitting a wall.

Owner Frank Davern believes he's just begun to tap into the demand for lighter-weight boards for girls.

The longtime skater said the website, at www.coolgirlskateboards.com, was not meant to be his main sales vehicle. It was designed to support wholesale sales to skate shops.

But finding wholesale buyers for the Pirate Girl, Femme Fatale and Black Flower Power boards among the young guys buying for independent shops hasn't been easy.

"I'm making money, but I should be delivering pallets of boards to my distributor instead of boxes," Davern says.

The 45-year-old entrepreneur, an Orange County native, stumbled onto the unmet need for a girls' skateboard by accident.

A 2004 write-up in a German skateboard magazine about his original website, which is devoted to the international music and party scene as reported by young women around the world, sparked a flood of inquiries from readers who assumed that the site, at www.coolgrrrls.com, was selling skateboards.

Davern, who says his entrepreneurial spirit started in grade school when he caught and sold blue-bellied lizards to his playground buddies for 50 cents each, decided to answer the call.

He designed a board with the traditional laminated layers of Canadian maple but made each layer slightly thinner than those used in boards designed for guys. His deck -- the board minus the wheel assembly -- has six layers instead of the traditional seven.

"Even though it's just a few ounces, it makes a difference when you're trying to get air" during a jump, Davern says.

He quickly got a break when VK Skateboard Distribution Inc., part of the tightknit Orange County skateboard scene, agreed to offer Davern's boards to its skate-shop customers nationwide.

Davern also attracted pro female skater Holly Lyons to head his team of girl skaters, the youngest of whom is 8. Skateboard makers typically sponsor a team of riders who use their products and promote their brands. Both parties benefit from the increased exposure.

Sales at Cool Girl Skateboards grew to \$60,000 last year from \$10,000 in 2005. About \$40,000 came from the online sale of 400 skateboards in the five weeks before Christmas.

This year Davern estimates that revenue will reach \$70,000 to \$80,000, boosted in part by summer sales of about 300 boards a month. The boards sell for \$96 each online.

The decks, which are made in San Diego and assembled into complete skateboards in Davern's living room, still have trouble being taken seriously by skate shops, which Davern believes represent the company's biggest potential for growth.

One local buyer illustrates Davern's challenge.

"If a girl's a skateboarder, I think she's more boyish and won't like girlish stuff on her board," says Mirko Antich, buyer for South Bay Skates and Museum. "Real girl skaters don't care what's on their board; they just want good wood."

Davern is stumped when it comes to figuring how to convince more buyers that they are missing out on potential sales to girls who want their own look but are often too intimidated by the male culture of a skate shop to demand it. He's pondering a postcard mailing but is unsure what to say.

"If I just could find the magic words," he says.

Action-sports market specialist Josh Spencer says numbers, not words, hold the key to unlocking skate-shop sales.

He recommends that Davern use market data on girls' greater spending power, growing action-sports participation and the sales pace for Cool Girl boards at those shops that do carry Davern's products. It wouldn't hurt to mention that Lyons' new apparel line, Sk8Grl, sold 3,000 units to 100 stores this month, its first, without any advance marketing.

"You are going to be hard-pressed to find a manager or owner of any retailer that will turn down something that's going to sell," says Spencer, public relations director for Imagine Marketing Agency, an action-sports consulting firm. Davern has already taken a number of steps that Spencer says he usually recommends to clients.

Davern has a related music-oriented site and a MySpace presence. He works with a pro skater and has his own team of young skaters. And he covers girls' skateboarding as a whole on his site, not just his team.

To accomplish his next goal, building wholesale sales to skate shops, Davern should turn over all wholesale business to his distributor, Spencer says. This would free up time to market via the distributor's e-mail list to shop managers and owners and work more closely with the distributor's sales team and the retailers.

Spencer suggests that Davern pull together a concise marketing e-mail message with numbers, a photo of Lyons in action and appropriate links.

If Davern signs an agreement with VK Skateboard Distribution to relinquish wholesale sales, owner Ryan Marshall has said he would be willing to let Davern use his large e-mail database for marketing messages.

"Frank obviously should have control of image and the marketing stuff, but Ryan's input and his sales guys' input on what's making the product move is very important as well," Spencer says. An e-mail blast would work better than sending postcards through the mail, Spencer says.

"I'm not a fan of mass mailings," he says. "Too often they are not opened by the shop owner and are, unfortunately, considered junk mail."

He also advises Davern not to focus on sending printed promotional material with a shop's skateboard order.

In the typical scenario, a young guy in the back of the shops is opening the boxes as fast as possible so he can get out to skate, Spencer says. Expensive promotional materials can get lost in the shuffle.

A better use of Davern's resources would be to create more point-of-purchase promotional items to send to shops, Spencer says. Posters, key chains and other goodies will get the Cool Girl name in front of skate-shop buyers and shoppers, he says.

Spencer also suggests that Davern strengthen his ties with skate shops by offering in-store product demonstrations, appearances by Lyons and participation in the Cool Girl-sponsored parties and community service events the company already does. Lastly, Spencer recommends that Davern boost his ties with his distributor's sales team while understanding that their roles are different.

"They are sales guys; they are not marketing guys," he says. "It's not their job to worry about image. Their job is to clock orders." Raising the bar with sales incentives, or even just handing out holiday gifts, will keep his brand in front of the sales team. Overall, Davern was pleased with Spencer's input. "I've already got several good ideas I'm working on after our talks," Davern says.

Spencer acknowledges that Davern is battling on more fronts than the average manufacturer to get his goods into the hands of customers. But he's confident that the walls thrown up by a mind-set that says girls can't skate or don't want their own gear are slowly coming down.

"Once buyers realize there is a want for this product, a more feminine skateboard product, as [the demand] grows, they can't deny the growth," Spencer says.

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