

SCOTT KUHLMAN talks about resurrecting his clothing empire from the dead



Twin Six ▶
Cashing in on Good Design



Sight Marketing ▶
Selling Your Story

MINNESOTA BUSINESS

OCTOBER 2009

LIFESTYLE TO LEGACY

AJASA Technologies defied a modest start to make millions with the goal of giving back

SURLY BREWING

With Great Beer Comes Great Profit

WELCOME TO INDIA,

Home of Your Future Employees

(Anthony Williamson,
CEO, Co-Founder of
AJASA Technologies)

▶ EMERGING COMPANY: Twin Six



To see Twin Six co-founders Ryan Carlson and Brent Gale lounging in their modest office digs, you'd never know they were in the midst of running a burgeoning [global] clothing empire.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN BIKING (WITHOUT REALLY TRYING)

BY DREW WOOD
PHOTOS BY MARSHALL FRANKLIN LONG

The graphic design masterminds behind **Twin Six Alternative Cycling Apparel** are a testament to how business neophytes armed with innate ability, good timing and a solid partnership can lead to undeniable, organic business success.

There's nobody in there." ¶ The screen door, briefly opened, whaps shut and the salesman's heels spin on the crackly cement, "Oh, nobody's in there?" ¶ There is a soft groan in unison, "Yeah." ¶ The salesman shuffles closer, "Huh. What shop is this anyway?" ¶ The folding chairs creek as the shop's proprietors lean forward like they've been through this before, "Twin Six." ¶ The salesman stops, "Huh?" ¶ There's more creaking, uncomfortable, possibly annoyed, creaking, "It's Twin Six." ¶ The salesman's feet shift as he thumbs his briefcase, "What kind of shop is Twin Six?" ¶ "Apparel. Cycling apparel." ¶ There is an audible silence. Even the endless parade of dump trucks that has been roaring north on Bloomington Avenue seems to cease. ¶ And then ... ¶ "Oh! Okay. I'm with Farmer's Ins—" ¶ "—We're solid. We're rock solid." ¶ More audible silence. ¶ "No problem." The heels spin once again and shuffle away.

"Thanks, man," says Brent Gale as he turns his attention back to our interview, unphased. "What it came down to is the Packard brothers bought a car. It sucked. They went back to the guy and he said if you think you could do better, do it yourselves, and they did. And that really kind of resonated with us." And just like that, with neither a pause nor acknowledgement of the interruption, Brent Gale was reinvested in his description of how his company, Twin Six Alternative Cycling Apparel, received its name.

The thing is, the story of Brent Gale, 38, and Ryan Carlson, 33, the duo behind Minneapolis-based Twin Six, resonates on a different level than the typical *Minnesota Business* feature. In fact, in telling the story of a company that finds contentment in the lower hanging fruits of the corporate money tree, the cold calling insurance salesman interrupting an interview being conducted on the sidewalk because it offers more space than within the office itself, is perfect entre.



A "CYCLING APPAREL AND LIFESTYLE COMPANY" that positions itself as the "alternative to everything else" in the suddenly hot cycling market, Twin Six truly powers its own engine and, like the Packard brothers before, has risen to meet the challenge of building a better proverbial mouse trap.

"While I was freelancing for a company that did cycling apparel I kind of realized that most cycling graphics just didn't appeal to me even a little bit. I was designing some jerseys and was doing research and just realized that nothing was compelling," says Brent Gale of his first spark towards Twin Six. "At that point I kind of came up with this idea of starting a company that was based on a higher level of graphics for the cycling industry."

Knowing that if he were to succeed he would need the help of a like-minded designer, in 2003 Gale tapped Carlson, a former colleague at local design shop Sussner Design, and began planning. However, with families and promising careers—Gale was a

graphic designer at Target and Carlson was a senior designer at Colle+McVoy—the pair initially worked on the concept casually.

When they finally went to the bank in an effort to turn their beer-fueled daydreaming into a proper business venture, their loan request hit a snag. "We wanted to go in and get a loan so we wouldn't have to take out [home equity loans] and they were like, 'You need to write a business plan,' says Gale with something resembling pride. "And we were like, 'I don't [insert well intentioned expletive here] know how to do that.' I don't even know what those numbers would actually mean because we don't know, you know?"

Thus, in 2004, figuring that their idea was better suited to organic growth, the Twin Six duo found funding on their own and left the business plan unwritten.

"We knew that if we wanted to do it we would have to make it to Interbike. We figured we could get the company going if each of us were to put in between \$3,500 and \$5,000," says Gale, articulating Twin Six's plan to crash the premier cycling industry trade show. "That money would include our booth, our product samples, brochures, signage, that kind of thing. Basically, Interbike would be the test and if we had success we would move forward, and if we didn't we'd cut our losses. \$10,000 in and we were willing to say, 'Well, that was a fun project for a year.'"

In the fall of 2005, home equity loans in hand, Carlson and Gale hit the road.

"We drove down in my VW packed to the gills with a homemade booth—spray painted tables, retro-fitted sign displays and a 23 inch computer monitor running off of a laptop hidden under a table," says Carlson of their haphazard jaunt to Interbike in Vegas. "It was the definition of home-spun, and it killed."



The newest addition to the Twin Six office space: actual employees.



Gale and Carlson recount their gamble lightheartedly and, when pressed, refuse to admit that it took some serious guts to take such a risk with young families and mortgages, especially without any discernable business acumen aside from innate branding skills and defined product knowledge.

"Where were we lacking, maybe," asks Gale, rhetorically. "In having run a business. That, we didn't have any experience in. Either we got lucky or—"

"—Just maximizing opportunities and crossing bridges when they came up," says Carlson, quick to pick Gale up. "We never wrote a business plan. The formula for how to start something is not how we started this. It was like, 'Okay, we've gotta do this, let's figure out how to do this.'"

Gale and Carlson weren't merely flying blind at Interbike, however, as their award winning design acumen coupled with a precise notion of the void in the marketplace proved invaluable.

"Good design speaks," says Gale. "How were we able to come out with nothing and jump right in? We heard, 'How did those Twin Six guys do it? They came from nowhere and now they're in the middle of this scene.'"

They hit the middle of the biking universe by focusing on an under-serviced niche and designing to their aesthetic. As Carlson says, "It isn't made out of gold. It's

BIZBRIEFING Twin Six Alternative Cycling Apparel

Headquarters: Minneapolis, MN

Inception: 2005

Description: Twin Six is a fashion forward cycling apparel and lifestyle company offering finely designed wearables appropriate on and off the bike as well as a whole mess of other cycling-inspired merchandise.

Employees: 4

Website: twinsix.com

LEADER PROFILES

Ryan Carlson

Title: Co-Owner **Age:** 33

Education: BA, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities **First job:** Shining shoes at a country club **Family:** Wife, Jessica; Son, Ryder

Brent Gale

Title: Co-Owner **Age:** 38

Education: BFA, Minnesota State University, Moorhead **First job:** Dairy Queen **Family:** Daughter, Eleanor

O'FLANNIGAN

*Waterfront and Residential
Properties throughout the St. Croix
River Valley, extending to Lake
Superior and Northwest Wisconsin*



LAKE PEPIN, STOCKHOLM, WI

Architecturally designed cottage set on a wooded bluff offering spectacular views of Lake Pepin. Charming interiors offering lake vistas in every direction.

\$889,000



LAKE PEPIN, STOCKHOLM, WI

Surrounded by mature pine forest this newly built cottage overlooking Lake Pepin from its bluff top location is utterly charming. Nestled in the center of its 7 acre site, seclusion is assured. Architecturally designed to provide views from every space, this weekend getaway or year round home is a mere one hour from the Twin Cities.

\$699,900



LAKE PEPIN, LAKE CITY, MN

A magnificent estate with 25 acres set high on the bluffs above Lake City offering stunning views of Lake Pepin and the Wisconsin bluff country. New 7,000 sq. ft. all brick home finished by Amish craftsman for superb quality and detail. Very private setting with easy access to Rochester and Twin Cities.

\$1,500,000



651-430-7759
www.oflannigan.com



Office Solutions Friendly to Your Budget & the Environment



- ☑ Fast Service
- ☑ Service Done Right the First Time
- ☑ MFP & Network Uptime Expertise
- ☑ Flexible, Cost Effective Pricing
- ☑ Print Management Solution
- ☑ Print, Copy, Scan, Color, & Fax
- ☑ Green Solution Options
HP, Canon, Konica Minolta, Copystar

Your Authorized HP Edgeline,
MFP, and Printer Dealer

Call Loffler today to discuss
how our integrated solutions
can help you

Multifunctional Copiers | Printers | Fax
Telephones | Dictation
Voice & Video Recorders | Document
Management Software | IT Solutions &
Managed Services
On-site Managed FM Services

LOFFLER

952.925.6800
www.loffler.com

► EMERGING COMPANY: Twin Six

a polyester jersey. There's a billion of them out there."

"It's not too hard to beat the [heck] out of somebody who's trying to sell a jersey with Sponge Bob on it," Gale adds.

Even with desired designs, mediocre competition and success at Interbike—REI was quick to sign on as a vendor—Twin Six was not immediately sustainable. Accordingly, neither Gale nor Carlson left the comfort of MinneADpolis immediately. Instead, Twin Six was relegated to nights and weekends until their growth demanded more. Gale was the first to go fulltime, headquartering in his basement woodshop, and before long loans were paid, an office space was leased and Carlson had gone fulltime too.



THE FACT THAT FOR THE FIRST COUPLE years the pair were making a fraction of what they were in advertising doesn't bother them, but possibly that's because they are just now beginning to make more.

"You kind of saw this glimmer of potential," says Carlson of what finally wrestled him away. "You could see the results if you were all in. When I finally decided I needed to leave my employer, and I was confident in what I was doing, it was time to rock and roll."

Since 2006 they have become more than simply designers of fashionable cycling apparel. In fact, their website, twinsix.com, is more destination than catalogue; including a Twin

Six racing team page featuring race results and rider blogs, daily Twin Six updates and musings, limited edition designs, and charity sponsorships—their work with "Fat Cyclist" Eldon Nelson netted \$40,000 for the Lance Armstrong Foundation last year.

And then there's the fact that Twin Six's trend-conscious aesthetic has done the previously undoable and brought disparate sectors of the biking population together, as Mike Dzubay, buyer and shop manager at Wayzata's Sports Hut says.

"I'll hang out with them [at Interbike] and it's funny because you get the triathletes and you get the single-speed tattooed messenger guys," says Dzubay of the brand he has a hard time keeping on the shelves. "It's two totally different crowds, but you'll have them both sitting at the booth looking at stuff going, 'Oh, that's so cool.' It's two opposite ends. It's just like, 'You guys like the same thing?'"



YET CARLSON AND GALE INSIST THAT, despite the fact that they've won numerous awards including *Outside Magazine's* 2006 bike jersey of the year (for an argyle number which was subsequently hijacked by the major brands and summarily dropped by Twin Six), and are carried in over 200 bike shops globally—and even one high-end, Israeli jean shop—they still haven't really tried.

"We've managed our growth because we couldn't afford to grow any faster. We've

“We've managed our growth because we couldn't afford to grow any faster. We've managed our growth to this point by not trying.”

—BRENT GALE, CO-FOUNDER OF TWIN SIX ALTERNATIVE CYCLING APPAREL

managed our growth to this point by not trying," says Gale. "To this point we still haven't tried. We don't have a sales force. We don't do any cold calling. It's all word of mouth."

However, not really trying does, in fact, consist of some real effort. Every design—up to 36 originals annually—is done by Gale and Carlson, as are the press releases, web presence, manning of trade show booths, making of sales and, until recently, shipping of products.

"Our not trying to grow is starting to break our backs," says Gale.

"We're control freaks regarding how things get done, but at a point you've got to be a bit more hands-off," says Carlson. "The time we spend with the very intimate details of running the business I see getting less and less, and we're starting to think more big-picture: How are we going to evolve and change?"

And, if what Pete Harrington, owner of London-based cycling clothier Always Riding, says is true, evolve and change they must.

"Twin Six is one of our best selling lines. It's being worn in London, Scotland, Wales and, in fact, last week we sent some to Dubai," says Harrington. "They're really out there alone and have a truly distinct style. Nothing that we sell, or that is available elsewhere, comes close to their particular take on the cycling world. I would imagine that Twin Six will become one of the most recognizable, largest apparel brands in the world over the next five years. It is rare to create something so distinctive."

But, then again, for a company based solely on innovation and creativity, they're not above leaving the door open for something else to come along either.

"Can you put this at the end? 'Twin Six is for sale. Brent and Ryan will sell this company to you—all they want is \$1 million each?'" Gale says in a way that implies his quote won't actually make it to print. And then, more seriously, "I am totally comfortable, for the right price, letting somebody destroy what we've created."

The cycling world hopes not. **MB**



10
20
09
October 20th, 2009

THE CONFERENCE THAT EMPOWERS YOU TO
RECRUIT AND RETAIN
THE BEST YOUNG EMPLOYEES

www.rockstarsatwork.com

The
Bailey
Group

Tired of leading through crisis?

Declining profits, employee layoffs, restructuring, and unpredictability have taken their toll on a leader's motivation.

***It's time to energize yourself and
spark motivation in others!***

As executive coaches, we work with you to:

- Energize you and your team
- Turn crisis into opportunity for change
- Motivate others through crisis and beyond

Lead Well. Motivate Employees. Get Results.

Contact The Bailey Group Today!

Ask about our 4-session introductory packages

(763) 545-5997 or info@thebaileygroup.com

4800 Olson Memorial Hwy, Ste 225 | Minneapolis, MN 55422 | www.thebaileygroup.com