

## University Tees' student-based business model leads to satisfaction, success

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By

LAKEWOOD, Ohio -- Hanging around **University Tees'** office, you can tell something's just a little bit different.

There's not a cubicle in sight. Desks are scattered around the room in the car-making-plant-turned-artists'-studios. Music fills the cavernous space. And an impromptu game of ping pong might be taking place between casually-dressed office mates.

And then there is Samos, the co-founder's dog, wandering between desks before stretching out and lying down in the middle of the room. The office mascot might be sleeping, but the rest of the room is buzzing.

University Tees' offbeat, informal office atmosphere takes the pressure off employees to work simply for the sake of working, much like their student-based business model is structured to take the pressure off customers. The company is determined to make ordering promotional products easy, enjoyable and memorable.

University Tees' goal is to "deliver happiness" in the form of custom T-shirts, sweatshirts, hats and anything you can print on, Chief Sales Officer Mike Jones said. Their sister company, **OnPoint Promos**, started in 2009 and helps nonprofit organizations and commercial businesses market and create promotional products.

Nick Dadas and Joe Haddad, who co-founded University Tees in 2003, wanted their company to emphasize personal development as well as hard work. In addition to their open-office atmosphere and casual dress code, the company no longer tracks vacation time and encourages employees to get up and recharge during the day, which explains the ping pong table.



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Mike Jones, chief sales officer at University Tees and OnPoint Promos, in Lakewood, holds a screen to print on a variety of clothing during a training session. The company does all its T-shirt screen printing on-site on the first floor of the building.



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Courtesy of Mike Jones

The company employs 43 people in Lakewood, including sales representatives, business development leaders, graphic artists as well as a production staff. In-house screen printing machines can take on more than 60 apparel projects in a single shift.

Samos, a female vizsla, belongs to co-founder and president Nick Dadas. Samos is the unofficial mascot of University Tees.

### **A worthwhile risk**

Dadas and Haddad didn't start college expecting to start a T-shirt printing business. They met as sophomores at a dorm at Miami University. They hit it off and got to know each other through their business fraternity, where they were exposed to the T-shirt business.

"It was meant to be in that time and that place and in that situation," Dadas said. "Everything kind of fell into place."

Once they graduated, they had to decide whether to pursue their business or find other, possibly more lucrative, job opportunities. Being young with few outside obligations, Dadas and Haddad decided the risk was worth it.

Jones said the company has been in their Lakewood building for about three years and now has a presence at 150 universities across the country. About 80 percent of their business is through University Tees, and the other 20 percent is from OnPoint. With University Tees, the business model is by students, for students.

"What differentiates us is our service," Haddad said. "So we thought to best reach a customer that's in college is to sell through a sales rep that's in college because they can relate to them."

At each campus, University Tees pays and trains student representatives, called campus managers, to market to campus organizations and sell them promotional products. Customers have the flexibility to meet with managers to talk over ideas and the ordering process whenever their busy college schedules allow.

The company also offers an online system called Bird Bank that lets individual customers choose their own size and pay for it directly.

University Tees sees their campus manager program as a learning experience for students to get them ready for the real world. Each manager can expect to earn about \$7,000 per year.

About half of University Tees' business is with sororities and fraternities, and the company is fully licensed by the national Greek councils to print items with Greek letters. Lori Ahart, this summer's sales intern and a campus manager at Kent State University, got involved in the program through an alumna in her sorority, Chi Omega.

Ahart, a junior, is a marketing major who never thought she'd ever make a career of sales, but she loved her job as a campus manager so much that she decided to take on an internship as well. Right now, She is working with OnPoint on a project called Charitees, which aims to help nonprofit organizations market and merchandise to raise funds for their cause. This summer, Charitees has been working with the **Ohio Buckeye chapter** of the National MS Society and has helped it raise about \$5,000 so far, Haddad said.

The chapter's marketing manager, Ana Cairns, said she has been working with OnPoint for six years now and really appreciates the lengths OnPoint will go to help with design work, work out logistics and alert the chapter to product price increases. Cairns said it has been much easier working with them because teams that participate in Walk MS can go to a pre-made website to customize their own shirts while still having access to the chapter's logo. Plus, a portion of the sales go back to the chapter.

"One of the nice things is we are able to push the program to our participants, stressing to them that by supporting a local company and this Charities initiative, they are then supporting the MS chapter in return," Cairns said. "It's kind of a win-win."

She also said the T-shirts have kept past participants interested in the nonprofit - people consistently ask about new designs and colors.

"From our standpoint it's really important that we continue that public awareness and brand after the event," Cairns said. "It's not just a T-shirt they have to get, but they get it because they like it."

### **An unconventional approach**

So far this year, the corporate and the campus sides of the company have had record success. May was a "historic" month for sales, Haddad said, and in June, sales doubled. Spring is typically good for the company given the activity on college campuses, Haddad said.

If he could fast-forward five to 10 years, Dadas said he wants to see OnPoint with different divisions serving different industries to better identify business opportunities in those areas. Jones even mentioned the prospect of franchises down the line.

University Tees' growth is based on identifying a specific recipe for the right campus, Jones said. That means a large school with more than 5,000 students, a strong Greek life program and a location in the Midwest for ease of shipping. Doubling growth, Jones said, is as simple as doubling the number of campuses University Tees is on, which would require strong recruiting efforts.

The company also embraces the unconventional. Employees at University Tees and OnPoint get \$150 each every year to try something new. The purpose is to break out of comfort zones, whether that means skydiving, joining a basketball league or taking golf lessons.

Scott Loehrke, who works on business development for OnPoint said he likes working for a company that values his ideas and encourages him to explore his interests. He worked for a different company right out of college, but found there was a "level of happiness missing."

"I think it takes doing a job that's not fulfilling to appreciate a job that is," he said.

Loehrke said he thinks he and his colleagues are spoiled by the atmosphere at their office.

"I can't think of one time in the last two years where I drove into the parking lot and thought, 'Oh God, I don't want to be here,' and that's a good feeling."

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