

In Focus: Executive Leadership

BUSINESS

Timbuk2 Embraces Founding Spirit, With a Modern Twist

● Patti Cazzato, chief executive officer of Timbuk2, shares her approach to growing the brand.

BY WWD STAFF

When Rob Honeycutt founded the San Francisco-based bag company Timbuk2 in 1989, the tenets of the company were built on his perspective as an inventor with an appreciation for lean manufacturing principles, and his experience as a bike messenger. The company was an early adopter of customization, and the popularity of Timbuk2's original messenger bags propelled it to success.

Today, the company still maintains an entrepreneurial spirit that leverages nimbleness, fearlessness and a willingness to make bold moves. As part of an ongoing series of interviews between Tim Boerkoel, founder of global executive search and consulting firm The Brownstone Group, and innovative leaders throughout the c-suite, Timbuk2 chief executive officer Patti Cazzato shares her approach to growing the brand.

Tim Boerkoel: As a merchant-inspired leader with a diverse background of managing brands, including your own at one point, what led you to Timbuk2?

Patti Cazzato: I have always been attracted to entrepreneurial-minded companies. My very first career job was with Esprit, working with eco visionaries Douglas and Susie Tompkins. But even further into my career, at large companies such as Gap and Levi Strauss & Co., I aimed to work for the smaller divisions, which has allowed me to take risks, think beyond the day-to-day and work collaboratively with my teams.

When I started my own company, I was really chomping at the bit to do a start-up from start to finish. In addition to Esprit, I worked for another husband and wife founder team, Libby and Sam Edelman. This gave me another glimpse of what launching a brand would entail, and I was ultimately inspired to apply myself in a similar ground-up effort, which is why I created Clary Sage Organics. We made locally manufactured, hand-sewn, eco-sustainable yoga apparel, and offered a holistic wellness center. I was able to really combine my personal passions and business acumen.

T.B.: Having followed the Timbuk2 brand, and recently touring the office/factory, your belief in the entrepreneurial spirit and core values seems to have made the brand a logical home for you.

P.C.: Yes, and what I love about Timbuk2 is that it's a midsized company with opportunity for growth. And although it had existed for 25 years when I joined in 2014, it was a very nimble organization that

operated in many ways like a start-up. The company is always fleshing out new and exciting ideas and looking through a discovery lens, an approach that notably echoes the spirit of San Francisco.

I knew Timbuk2 and I had similar values, and with the areas of potential growth I saw, it made total sense to join the team. It is exciting to lead a brand that is committed to sustainability and means it. We make smartly designed bags that look great – including customizable products – with lifetime warranties. We repair bags, repurpose bags and never send bags to landfill.

Urban local manufacturing has also been at the forefront since day one, when our founder made his first bag out of his garage here in San Francisco. Today, Timbuk2's valuing of the community is perhaps best seen in our 23,000-square-foot factory in the Mission District – which is physically attached to our headquarters. It is here where we manufacture all of our customized bags. There are just 17 steps between my desk and the factory. How many ceo's can say that?

T.B.: We know businesses can't grow on uplifting stories alone, and so how

do you maintain the spirit you've discussed while constantly improving company performance?

P.C.: What I love about our founder, Rob Honeycutt, is that he was an inventor and instilled values into the company that have been in place since day one. He embraced individuality and self-expression with this idea of conquering the city through finding freedom on a bike. A really smart, intuitive, personal and long-lasting bag makes the experience that much more obtainable. This brand is truly authentic, and we still share these ideals. People feel the spirit of Timbuk2 and the story and the products resonate with them – largely due to the fact that it's all true and the value proposition is real.

T.B.: Perhaps launching your own company at one point influenced you, but how did you know to keep Timbuk2's founding story as the crux of the brand?

P.C.: When you assume responsibility for a brand, you can either lean further into its heritage, or you can push away from the original vision. You can come in and say, "Hey I'm going to do it my way

now," but I think that's a bit disrespectful, and often counter to the existing potential of the brand. To me, I would never have wanted to change Rob's vision. Ever. I have an unspoken respect, partially born from being a founder of my own company, and trust that the brand's originating story is a large part of its purpose and future success.

T.B.: With Timbuk2's historical existence in mind, what has the strategy been recently to further build the brand? How have you gotten to the impressive status you enjoy today?

P.C.: In addition to our manufacturing and product differentiators, many people join us because of the amazing community we have established at the retail level. If you visit one of our stores, we offer a free bike-share program, which encourages members of our community to get out and explore their own neighborhood.

While at our brick-and-mortar locations, you can also hear, feel and see the whole notion of better products. All Timbuk2 retail stores feature Factory2, a nod to our heritage as a local manufacturer. The installation brings our online customizer to life, complete with an original Singer sewing machine, fabric swatches and even a "peephole" into a video of custom bags being made in our San Francisco factory. This offering is a perfect example of how we meld digital with retail and bring the community into one of our 24 stores. With our Lifecycle Program, we also promise to either repair, upcycle, or recycle your bag, so that nothing ever goes to waste. People believe in the promotion of better cities, so these offerings instill an entire notion around future-shaping, the idea that companies have the responsibility to take the necessary steps in order to make our communities a better place.

And now more than ever, whether you're a bike messenger, engineer, graphic artist or executive, Timbuk2 makes a bag for you. And if you want a one-of-a-kind piece, you can customize it online, it will be made in the Mission, and you'll be enjoying it in a week.

T.B.: And we understand there are some exciting collaborations coming up, which will further spread the Timbuk2 brand. Can you share?

P.C.: We've done some really fun collaborations with our wholesale accounts, our retail stores, and with our international partners. We've even done some with artists, including Apexer, who makes beautiful street art throughout San Francisco, and Dave Ortiz in New York City. We just launched Scumbags with Urban Outfitters in the U.S. and Beams in Japan, a bag that pays homage to our 29-year heritage. Before Timbuk2 was Timbuk2, it was Scumbags, so the classic messenger bag celebrates that part of our original brand story.

We also have additional space at our San Francisco headquarters/factory that we are turning into a community hub. This collaborative space will include our flagship, a peek into all the action at our factory, and a partnership with Fort Point Brewery which will put the top two manufacturers in San Francisco under one public roof.

T.B.: You've mentioned some great team members at Timbuk2 who help to drive the company and its mission forward. How do you hope your employees view your leadership?

P.C.: I would hate to put words in anyone's mouth, but recently a team member described me as "fearlessly optimistic." At the end of the day, I've been in retail long enough to know that in order to succeed, you must have a beginner's mind-set.



Patti Cazzato