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Laid-back about a hardcore market

Brad and Gia Boyle are succeeding as online retailers of active-travel gear, almost in spite of themselves

By Linda Keene
Correspondent

If hype were a commodity, Brad Boyle would be broke. He doesn't advertise his business. He doesn't link to other Web sites. And he certainly doesn't talk with venture capitalists.

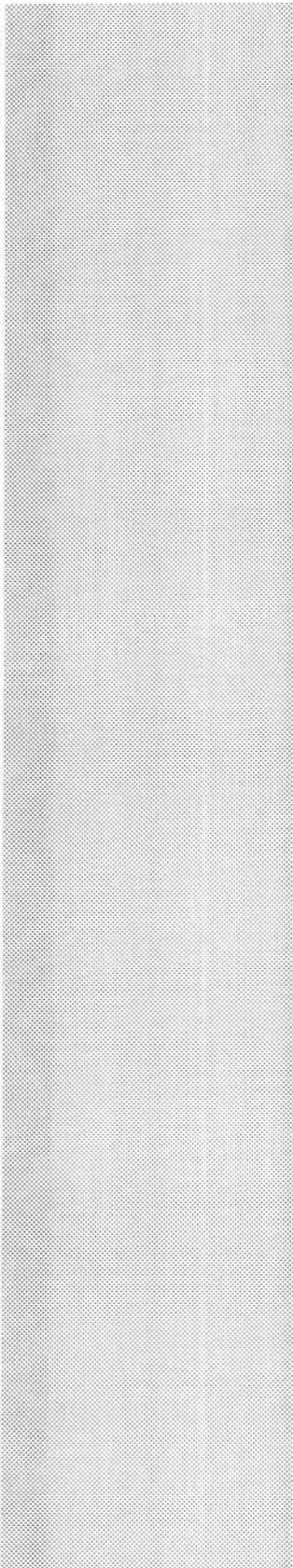
Yet the founder of Walkabouttravelgear.com (who obviously doesn't listen to marketers about pithy names, either) saw his business grow by 40 percent this year, returning a respectable \$250,000 in sales.

Not bad for a self-described slacker who finally did what many slackers only wish they could do -- convert a passion into a successful small business.

"You can't go on forever quitting your job and traveling for a year," says Boyle, 39, who works out of his Utah home and has outfitted his Pace Arrow motor home as a second office for the road.

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When whim or business calls, he heads out in his mobile command center, probably the only motorized, cellularized, Internet-connected motor home to enter the hot, adventure-travel market. Although there are no hard figures on this segment, it's a growing part of the \$5 billion outdoor recreation market, according to a report by Outdoor Retail magazine.

Industry giants such as Recreational Equipment Incorporated still dominate the market -- REI had \$587 million in sales last year -- but smaller operators are cashing in, especially if they fill a niche.

Hardcore gear for hardcore travelers

Boyle, for example, specializes in outback necessities such as lightweight towels that can hold up to nine times their weight in water. If you sweat a lot, you know how essential that product can be.

The business idea was born five years ago during a trip to Malta, an island off the coast of Italy, where other travelers questioned Boyle about his gear. Where'd he get it? And, more importantly, where could they?

Although the skills he learned as an MBA student had long ago become dormant -- lost in the back woods of China somewhere? -- Boyle realized that independent, hardcore travelers were willing to pay for hardcore gear. Backpacks are nice and all that, but these adventurers really needed a portable urinal for those "Third World beer festivals," says Boyle. "The buses in China just don't stop."

Moreover, there was an acute need for other non-glam gear, including electrical adapters, and phone jacks (there are 39 different types of telephone jacks in the world.) Walkabouttravelgear.com even offers a palm-size hairdryer, although, Boyle freely admits, "Our travel philosophy with hair has always been: cut it off and keep it short."

It's that kind of edgy commentary that keeps the site pure, and popular, according to users and other travel junkies. Although Walkabout is outpaced in sales by competitors such as Gorp.com, its customers are loyal.

An unwillingness to sell out

"They appeal to the non-luxury, down-to-earth traveler -- the kind of person who doesn't walk into Macy's to buy their luggage," says Jim Fortney, editor at Bigworld.com, a gritty travel magazine site that also targets tough-guy travelers.

Fortney credits some of Boyle's success to his unwillingness to "sell out" by accepting ads or partnering with large, mainstream firms.

"I think it's a big turn off when you go to a travel-supply place with a zillion ads," he says. "Down-to-earth travelers want plain, non-gussy supplies."

Boyle and his wife, Gia, couldn't agree more. Their simple lifestyle led to a simple business plan: They launched the site with \$5,000 in personal savings, and another \$5,000 borrowed on credit cards. When the business finally got off the ground, they moved from Salt Lake City to the remote town of Moab, Utah, to further simplify their lives.

Keeping their lives simple may mean standing pat in terms of further sales growth. The business has achieved what Boyle calls a "comfortable" profit margin, and to take it to the next level would mean adding staff and seeking venture funding. For the moment, anyway, the Boyles are loath to do that.

"We're far from any Internet buzz," says Boyle. "If we did want to secure some Internet financing, we wouldn't be here."

The Boyles inventory all their goods, and ship them via FedEx or UPS. It's totally hands on, and Boyle has the calluses to prove it.

He earned an MBA from Westminster College in Salt Lake City, although "the only thing I learned is how to spell 'entrepreneur.'"

He rigorously rejects most hype, saying small businesses need to focus on just that -- staying small -- until they are truly, responsibly ready to grow.

"We ignored everything we read, heard and what we were told," he said of the company's early days. "We don't even run economic analysis -- and even if we did, we wouldn't follow what it said."

Boyle doesn't mean to sound like the Internet anti-Christ, but he's wary of get-rich-quick schemes and many of the aggressive changes afoot.

"I'm surprised at the speed this year that the big corporations have moved in and taken over the Internet and made it a commerce," he says. "It's kind of sad. We've resisted going real big."

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