APPEALING TO THE SENSES

American Provenance personal care products become crowd favorites

Kyle LaFond always knew he wanted to own a business. But he never would have guessed it’d revolve around all-natural personal care products. In 2014, frustrated by the lack of natural deodorants, Kyle set out to make his own. Soon he was gifting homemade deodorant and aftershave to friends and family. The tubes and bottles had no labels and no visual appeal. But his friends knew he was onto something with the product inside.

With much encouragement, Kyle launched American Provenance in May 2015. This time, the products appealed to all of the senses. Customers responded to American Provenance’s signature labels and scents, not to mention the short and simple ingredient lists. Soon, the business was employing eight people, stores and pharmacies across the state were carrying the products and the company appeared in Real Simple Magazine. Kyle says this wouldn’t be the case without the Small Business Development Center (SBDC).

It was Kyle’s banker who first told him about the SBDC. “It might serve you some good to meet with someone at SBDC to go over your business plan,” he’d suggested.

Kyle scheduled a meeting with business consultant Michelle Somes-Booher, an expert on strategy. “I met with her for an hour and she probably gave me about two weeks’ worth of homework,” he says of their first meeting. “She had some very good constructive criticism.”

The biggest takeaway was that he needed to do more research. Michelle introduced him to UW Madison Business Librarian, Peggy Smith who helped him use a database that, based on demographics, identifies how many potential customers are in a given area. “I was able to get a good idea of how many folks out there could actually be purchasing my stuff -- if I was fortunate enough to get it in the right places, in grocery stores and pharmacies and whatnot,” Kyle says. (He obviously was.)

“One of the things I’ve learned by working with Michelle is that my business plan is a fluid document. I’m still updating it, working on it as we go,” he says. Kyle initially thought online sales would outpace retail sales, but he realized people like the chance to test and smell personal care items.

Michelle suggested growing online business by finding a partner like Uncommon Goods, a curated online and catalog retailer. He did that, and his success with Uncommon Goods helped land a shout-out in Real Simple Magazine.

Business is growing fast enough that, to keep up with sales, Kyle is considering whether to buy an in-house labeling line or hire a labeling company. In the meantime, Kyle is doing much of the labeling by hand. “I come out here after dinner; turn some music on and just label, label, label,” he jokes. “If we do get a larger label operation, I’ll have to find some other outlet to relax.”