



Case Study: Wm. J. Mills & Co. – Rebuilding a Brand and Developing New Opportunities

Background: Wm. J. Mills & Co. is a small, local awning and marine canvas provider located on the East End of Long Island. A fifth-generation family-owned company, Mills had, in the past, largely relied on their reputation and referral network for new business, and had fallen into a reactive, rather than proactive advertising model. This, coupled with a considerable turnover in area population had brought a new client-base which was not aware of the company and what products and services it offered. This, coupled with increased industry competition from national, non-custom retractable awning products had begun to erode Mills' market-share and client base.

Challenge: Primary: redefine and reestablish Wm. J. Mills & Co. as a multiple product and service provider, but in a simple and publicly-digestible manner. Secondary: Discern and promote new business opportunities from within production base.

Solutions

Primary: We took a long, hard look into this company's past – nearly a hundred and thirty years worth of material, products and people. Their product lines ranged from sailmaking to Boston Whaler™ Canvas, from Military Applications to a myriad unique solutions for covers, shelters and carryalls, just to name a few. They are craftsmen, tinkerers and solutions providers. They had a strong affinity for, and affiliation with, maritime culture and seamanship. Once all of these facts were distilled, what became apparent to us, but which they could not see because they were so caught up in the day-to-day workings of their business was actually a simple solution: they are master-craftsmen who work in one material: canvas.

Once the core of their business had been identified, we developed and trademarked their new tagline: Everything Canvas™, and also recognized the inherent value in the 'silk label' that they had been using for years on all of their canvas products. This label (see below), captured the essence of the company, leveraged its sense of history and craftsmanship. In combination with the new tagline, we had affordable base upon which to build and re-brand the company, always returning to the touchstone elements of history, craftsmanship and canvas for each separate product. Once this was established, we began creating various print, radio, web, business and sales collateral and direct response materials that consistently referenced our three core elements in conjunction with the tagline/label combination and, with a modest budget, were well on our way to re-establishing Wm. J. Mills & Co. as the premiere canvas solutions provider in its range.

Secondary: For about fifty years the company made various canvas items, from duffel and tote bags to carryalls and shaving bags, as a way of both utilizing scrap canvas from larger projects and a way of keeping the production staff busy in the winter months. The bags and accessories had been largely considered a 'throwaway item' by the family; it's purpose was served just by being made and sold in the front 'showroom' at a price often equal to the item's production and materials cost.

As early as our initial meeting in the spring of 2006, we identified the vast potential of these previously overlooked items. It was our opinion that with the proper branding, this product line could become a revenue source greater than the sum of all of the company's other divisions. Admittedly, this observation was received with some degree of amusement.

Once we had established the company's primary solution (see above), we applied these elements to the bag and accessories line. Following market research, we recognized that the bag line's value was not necessarily intrinsic, but instead could only be fully realized through a close association with the three elements of history,

craftsmanship and canvas, and again in conjunction with the tagline/label branding vehicle. In 2007, we began to ‘tell the story’ of the bag-line in conjunction with the company’s long and storied history. We redesigned the company’s showroom to better showcase the product lines . Again, on a minimal budget, we took somewhat of a guerrilla approach to marketing the line, seeding internet and public relations opportunities whenever possible to promote the brand messaging consistently and memorably. Moreover, we handled all communications to public and media outlets, developing relationships that resulted in momentum and increased public interest, using a modified public relations strategy.

Soon, the bags were receiving notice, and our efforts resulted in national exposure on The Martha Stewart Show, the Early Show on CBS, Good Morning America NOW, and various publications including *Food & Wine Magazine*, *Real Simple*, *Blueprint Magazine*, *Ready Made Magazine*, *Teen Vogue*, *Hampton Cottage and Garden*, *The New York Times* Style section and a host of others. This exposure led to an upsurge of interest in the blogging and fashion communities, and a web-buzz began to build.

As a result, the company began to receive wholesale inquiries from small and medium sized retailers and distributors. With increasing interest but a still-limited budget, we developed a ‘ground strategy’ to get the bags out on the street in major markets. Beyond economics, our premise for this strategy was simple: if viewed solely on the web against its competition, Mills Bags could easily be mistaken as parity products, and that it was not until a potential customer actually handled the bag that the incredible difference in heft, quality and craftsmanship would become apparent, thus easily justifying the product’s price point. Perhaps more importantly, we were able to both identify and leverage the company’s rich and unique history as a point of differentiation from the competition.

We worked with the principals to develop a tiered wholesale price structure that would profitably cover the cost of production yet keep the product within reach of most small and medium sized retailers on the low quantity end, and reward larger wholesalers with discounts according to economy of scale. By the winter of 2009 we were on the ground in stores from New York to California, and well as London. Additionally, we began to receive considerable interest from the Japanese and European markets, and once again handled all communications on both wholesale, retail and media relations levels.

By June of 2009, our efforts had resulted in an incredible level of interest in the bag and accessories lines, and exclusive wholesale contracts projected at nearly seven-figures on the table. At that time, the company welcomed other family members into the business to build upon this momentum and direct the bag and accessories division. Although we continue to work with the company’s other divisions, bag decisions are now being made apart from our guidance, though we remain proud of the results we generated in a small time-frame and on a limited budget.