

Ad Age Names Several Small Businesses As Hottest Brands



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Ad Age recently released its annual list of [America's Hottest Brands](#). And though corporate names like Sharpie, Dove and Chevrolet top the list, several startups and small businesses have also made the cut, including some little-known brands and products such as Skillet Street Foods' "bacon jam" and the military-inspired cult culture of CrossFit.

While small businesses don't have the marketing budgets of their big counterparts to reach customers, they do have other advantages. "What makes small businesses and niche products special is their customer community," Ad Age reporter Natalie Zmuda said. "Products like Skillet Street's bacon jam have built a passionate community around their product, which generates buzz and gets them noticed."

While many of the big brands were busy adapting their product lines to changing market needs, several of the hot startups were developing niche products that challenge the old way of doing things. Online retailers like fashion eyewear makers Warby Parker and flash sale site JackThreads focused on innovation and filled a gap in their market. Neil Blumenthal, co-founder of Warby Parker, explained that running a lean online company allows them to reach more customers and fulfill charitable obligations. "It's not that people haven't sold inexpensive glasses, but nobody has provided the quality at the price," he told Ad Age.

Menswear site JackThreads has expanded significantly since its launch in 2008. Founder Jason Ross sought to fill the void in discounted menswear, and in turn attracted attention from sites like Thrillist, which purchased JackThreads in 2010. The startup has 1.3 million members and 2012 revenue projections of \$50 million.

Though it often works for big businesses, changing a product or expanding a line isn't always

the right choice for small businesses. In an interview with Ad Age, CrossFit CMO and former Marine officer Jimi Letchford explained that despite inking sponsorship deals with Reebok and TV contracts with ESPN, don't expect to see CrossFit protein powders or DVDs. With 3,500 affiliate gyms around the world and nearly 50 added each week, Letchford said, "We're focused on just making good relationships," instead of pursuing traditional marketing.

Zmuda advises that for smaller brands to remain hot, they need to stay true to their product roots. "When you start to go beyond what made you hot in the first place, you start to pull away from your true brand and alienate your passionate customers."