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Grow a killer brand

How do you take a streetwear brand from pipe dream to production? **Anne Wollenberg** gets the answers from three established clothing labels who've got it all sewn up

Whoever you talk to, from one-man independents to leading global brands, the same thing lies at the heart of a successful streetwear operation: the customers. We've spoken to three labels of varying sizes to find out how they got started, and each one emphasises the

vital importance of tapping into your customers' loyalty in order to build a mutually rewarding relationship.

In the following pages, Lewis Boyce of artist-driven brand Suffoca explains the importance of grassroots marketing and word of mouth (plus a little help from your friends); Benny Gold reveals how his eponymous apparel line went from a few T-shirts and stickers to being sold in 100 stores worldwide; and

the brains behind long-running cult skate brand Zoo York tell you what sets it apart from its competition.

From the initial concept to the shop floor, via production prototypes and sewing in labels, whatever stage you're at, there's plenty here to inspire you. →





Suffoca

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“The clothing I was seeing in shops was so mass-produced,” says Lewis Boyce, who founded the London-based brand Suffoca in 2008. “It felt like the norm.

I thought I could come up with something that could really attract the customer and give them something unique and exciting to be part of,” he explains. The result was an artist-driven brand with a focus on hand-drawn illustrations, sold online via

www.suffoca.com. Boyce had been drawing characters under the name Suffoca long before he ventured into apparel, and he cites strong support from friends as a huge motivator in being able to get the business off the ground.

“I built Suffoca up from nothing, with no previous experience or funds, just an idea and a strong passion,” says Boyce, revealing his determination. “Financially, I got started by doing a number of jobs and then just kept reinvesting. If you have the time to take up a job while working on your company, it’s extra money you can put into your business to produce more, or better quality, products for your customers.”

The biggest challenge, he says, is sticking with it. “A lot of people expect things to blow up overnight, or they cut

corners. You need time to learn and grow your company. A brand with history will seem a lot safer and interesting to new faces, and will let you improve your products and processes.”

Suffoca is virtually a one-man operation, though Boyce has some help here and there. “I do all the tasks I can with what I have: designing, printing the packaging, sewing in labels, folding and posting out orders,” he says. “What I can’t do myself, I outsource to the highest quality I can. I also have great customers, who help out with spreading the company name and the stories.”

Suffoca endorsed some friends’ bands at the start, but business growth has mainly come from “word of mouth and great friends helping,” plus a lot of

social networking and interaction with customers via Twitter and Facebook. Take note: it’s this kind of relationship-building and grassroots interaction that can really help you to get your fledgling clothing line off the ground.

“The best thing I’ve found that can help with getting your company to grow is just speaking to people about it,” says Boyce in his final nuggets of advice. “Spread the word by mouth and keep your feet on the floor. Be creative and enjoy your surroundings, and spend time and money on the things that are important now – you’ll benefit in the long run.”



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01 Founder Lewis Boyce launched Suffoca in 2008 **without prior experience or savings**, and runs the brand with next to no outside help



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02 Boyce mixes traditional and **digital design techniques** to keep things from looking too contrived, and tries to keep the process varied



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03 Suffoca started with a single line of hand-drawn T-shirts. Several lines later, the label has developed and refined its **artist-driven aesthetic**



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04 Boyce says that **staying power and patience** are two of the most important things needed to launch a successful streetwear brand



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05 Suffoca initially endorsed some of Boyce’s friends’ bands, “but this messed with the **first come, first served** basis I run with the limited amounts I make.”

Case study #1

Suffoca

Beaneyed shirt

Company founder and artist Lewis Boyce explains how one of his designs makes it from pencil sketch to shirt

1 The idea twitch

This idea came to me while I was drawing. I kept getting a twitch in my eye, but carried on until it really started to bug me. While I was itching it with the rubber on the tip of my pencil, I started thinking that it would be funny if Beanman popped out after having a quick nap in my eyelid.

2 Time matters

I drew this and let it sit in my sketchbook for a while – I like to leave a lot of drawings to sit and then I go back to them. Eventually, while looking at this one idea, it made me think back to that time. I thought it would fit well if it was cropped in the same way as a photo would be.

3 Digital baselines

I took the pencil sketch I was happy with and scanned it in to redo the baselines digitally – that way I could get some nice thick, constant lines. Then I printed out the design and worked on the shading of it by hand. Then, when I was done, I scanned it in once again.

4 Mixed media

I mix traditional and digital, as it allows you to make those slightly 'wobbly' lines or intricate details without making the final design look too clean-cut. I don't think you should pin yourself down to one finish, though, so I play with as many materials as I can and it keeps it all fun.

5 Collection piece

The Beaneyed design was part of my most recent collection so, once I was happy, I prepped the files digitally for the screenprint process. I work with a printer who I keep a close bond with. He keeps me updated on his side, and he'll also give me his advice from a printer's point of view.

6 Hidden details

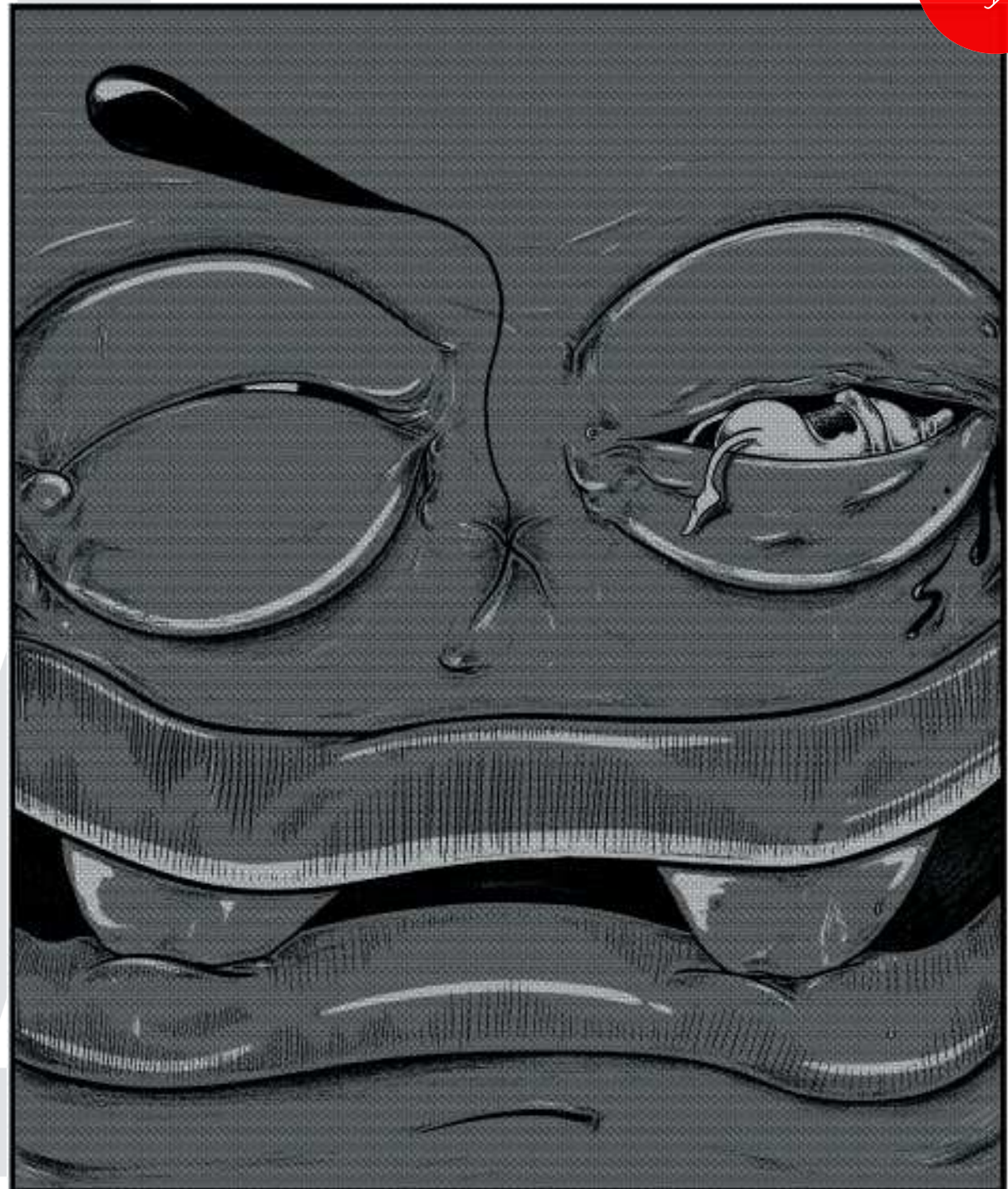
Once everything is back from the printers, I finish the products with sewn labels, hidden details and the extras that go into the clothing with the custom hand-printed packaging, to make not just a wearable product, but also a cool collectable item in its own right.

7 Group efforts

What happens next is that all my close friends come together to help me produce a photoshoot, movie and lookbook, which gives a great insight into how I run my company and how I want my customers to feel when they're purchasing, wearing or thinking of my brand.

8 Blog connection

Through keeping the whole process documented on the blog, the customers get excited when I do things, and learn alongside me. This encourages them to spread the word about everything new, from the latest collectable releases to the places I'll be visiting where they can come and hang out.



SUFFOCA

Benny Gold

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Slick though it may sound, Stateside streetwear label Benny Gold wasn't planned, exactly. "It just happened organically," says Gold of his eponymous brand. "There's no master plan. I was trying to do the best artwork I could, and it turned into something I never expected."

Gold's artistic background lies in graphic design. He moved to San Francisco after graduating from college

and worked for design agencies until he rejected the corporate grind in favour of creative freedom and satisfaction.

"The more I worked, the more my name started getting attached to the products I was working on: Benny Gold for this, Benny Gold for that. I thought if other people were marketing my name and selling it, I could do that on my own. And that's how it turned into a brand."

The clothing line is now around five years old. "I had always put out random T-shirts and stickers. Five years ago, I figured I'd have a real go at this. The projects I was getting were starting to be more T-shirt based, so I started putting out my own T-shirts more consistently."

In those early days, Gold collaborated with local clothing line HUF

(www.hufsf.com). "I helped him with his line and he said I could sell in his store. Then more stores were interested. Now I'm selling in over 100 stores round the world, but it's still an independent brand and it's still pretty much only me, though I have people running the store for me, and my wife quit her job to help out."

Located in San Francisco's Mission District, the first Benny Gold retail store also came about without much prior planning. "I rented a building in my neighbourhood to work out of and warehouse my products for shipping. I looked at the space one day and realised I had a pretty good location, so I opened a retail store on the ground floor."

It took financial investment, though, and hiring a firm to do the build-

out didn't come cheap. By the time Gold had realised this, "I was too far invested into it to turn back," he confesses. "I'm glad I put the money into it, though."

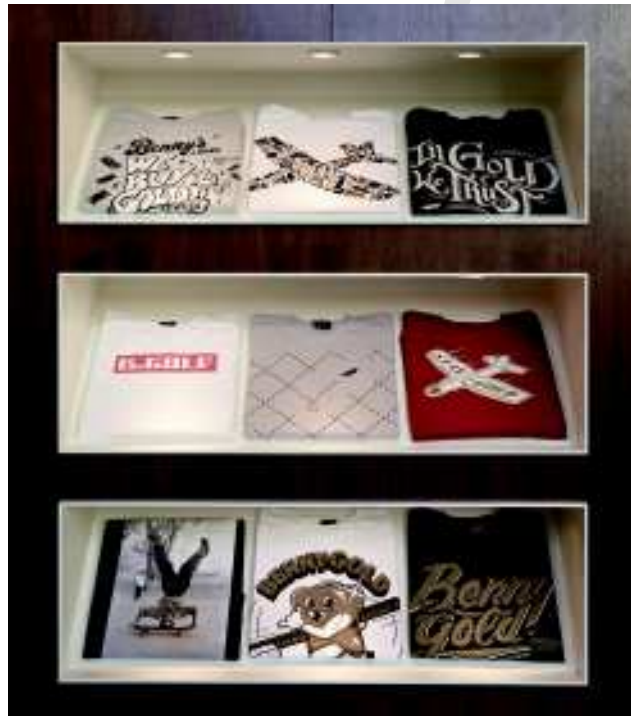
Like Lewis Boyce of Suffoca, Gold believes in the power of word of mouth and enlisting help from your friends. "If you want to start your own brand or market your own designs, then start locally. Give [your clothing] to your friends," he says. "The best advice I can give is not to rush things. Start small and locally. People who follow your brand will be even more loyal if they were with you right from the beginning."



Photography TomHood

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06 Benny Gold has amassed a **loyal following**: "My stickers have been around and a lot of bands and rappers have worn my stuff," he says



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07 "**People push stuff too fast**," Gold advises. "It's like when you graduate and expect to land a huge job – you have to start at the bottom," he explains

08 Benny Gold opened his own retail store in April in San Francisco's Mission District and says he **never really stops working**. "My wife makes fun of me.

But the beauty of working for yourself is that it doesn't really seem like work."



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Benny Gold product lifecycle

The growing San Fran brand's namesake maintains control throughout the process to ensure top quality

- 1 In-house design**
All the design happens in-house. I get stuff produced outside, but everything always starts here. I'm a designer, so everything is design-heavy, and everything I work on begins on paper. I usually start with lists. I write down things that inspire me, and then circle the pieces that I like.
- 2 Production-ready**
From there, I start sketching those ideas out. As they grow, I trace them, redraw them, clean them up, ink them and then bring them to the computer as a last step to clean up the artwork and get it production-ready. I work almost entirely with pen and ink on paper, and Adobe Illustrator.
- 3 Made in America**
I do tend to use different people for everything, but I try to have a lot of stuff made in the States. My denim is made in America, as are all my hats and all my T-shirts. I'm a real perfectionist, and like to oversee everything and make sure the quality of the line is as good as possible.
- 4 Quality checks**
The next stage of the process is to send the design off to the printer with my T-shirts and my labels for the inside of the neck. I check everything and make sure it comes out the way I want it to turn out. If I'm getting the printing done locally, then I'll go there and see it all on press.
- 5 Error limitation**
If I'm printing remotely, they'll send me a TOP (top of production) prototype, which is the one right before they send it for production. Patterns and colours can come back wrong, prints are too big, ink is too thick – that's why it's better to start with a local printer and learn what works.
- 6 Printer trust**
Once you've worked with a printer long enough, they know what you're looking for. How do you spot a good printer? It's all about trial and error. I have outgrown various printers along the way, for example, as I got larger and they couldn't handle the quantities I needed anymore.
- 7 Schedule juggling**
Production is the hardest part. It actually comes easily to me because it's my background and my passion, but it's been a learning experience along the way. I try to start as early and as far away from my deadlines as possible, but things often happen and the work piles up.
- 8 Self promotion**
We get the finished garments at the office, sort them out and send them out to stores. I do all the marketing and PR myself. I put blog posts on my site and use social networking as much as I can. I'm like an open book with my brand – I let everyone inside every working aspect of it.



Case study #2



Zoo York

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“Sidewalks, traffic and chaos,” is how Zoo York’s art director, Brian Mackin, describes the city that inspired the skate brand. The Big Apple didn’t just give Zoo York its name – it’s the creative force behind everything it does.

“The inspiration for our adverts and marketing is New York-driven, and we try to draw on the riders’ personality,” he explains. “Consumers understand the

difference between Zoo York and the rest of the industry, which is mostly California-based and a bit darker and heavier.”

Though it takes its roots from the 1970s graffiti and skateboarding culture that thrived in New York City, founders Rodney Smith, Eli Morgan Gessner and Adam Schatz officially started the brand in 1993. “It was mainly a skateboard company, but apparel was part of it from the beginning,” says brand manager Seamus Deegan.

“We started on the simple side, with T-shirts and sweatshirts. We still make plenty of skateboards, but we’ve grown our clothing collection.” Products include denim, fleeces, knits, bags and more, with watches and sunglasses arriving in 2011. “It’s a business – you

want to grow it, but everything has to be as authentic as possible.”

Zoo York turns 18 next year. “As a name, it’s so strong, it has its own trajectory – more than a lot of upstart brands,” says Deegan, who reveals that the company saw a growth spurt in the late 90s and really took off around 2000. “It’s only in the last couple of years that it’s really grown to the large-scale worldwide brand it is today,” he explains. “From a staffing and crew perspective, it’s still a very small company. A lot of people are involved in production and so on, but the number of people at the main heart of the brand is in the high 20s.”

Around 90 to 95 per cent of the design happens in-house. There are some creative collaborations too – Zoo York has

worked with musicians such as Ghostface Killah and recently teamed up with French graffiti artist and rider Gorey. Outsourced work is kept consistent with the Zoo York aesthetic, which takes its creative cues from skate culture, graffiti, art and design, “and what we see on a daily basis in New York and cities around the world.”

Deegan says: “We have a very active fanbase who love the products. It’s not just a brand – it’s got a lot of history. We’ve learned to do what makes sense to us and not just follow other brands in our industry. But we also need to stay relevant and real to our customers and ourselves.”



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09 Zoo York started with T-shirts and branched out into other areas such as footwear. **Watches and sunglasses** are being added from 2011

10 “Zoo York is a small brand that **casts a big shadow**,” reflects brand manager Seamus Deegan. “In terms of staffing and crew, it’s still a very small company,”

11 Zoo York is firmly rooted in **skateboarding, graffiti and youth culture**. “You do need to know what makes sense within your fanbase,” says Deegan

12 While experimentation works sometimes, other times it’s more self-gratifying. “We want to continue pushing it and **doing something unique**.”



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Zoo York graphic T-shirts

Inspiration comes from all over the world, but the final product must always have a New York state of mind

Case
study #3

1 Market trends

At the beginning of every season, the whole team goes out. We'll shop locally, or we'll travel – wherever we head out to we'll hit all the stores and maybe some art galleries just to get an overview of what is going on in the market, both on the graphic side and the apparel side.

2 Info overload

During our research we're looking for a lot of information. We need an overview of the current trends in the market, as well as to figure out where things will be in a year because you are always designing for the following year. We'll end up buying samples, e.g. of new materials.

3 Concept boards

We come back with tears of different references and we'll put those together and see where trends are going and what fits. Maybe we'll see something cool and take a photo, then we'll figure out how it translates into being something very Zoo York. From there, we'll build concept boards.

4 Spec and tech

Tech packs are put together and sent to our factories detailing all of the trims on each garment, the weight of the fabric, all of the colours and everything that goes into making that item. The spec size is standard across the board, so we don't have to worry about doing that every time.

5 Factory visits

The factories make prototype samples based on our tech packs. We deal with different factories for different things, depending on their specialities and whether they can handle a specific garment. We do travel to them – we're just about to travel to Asia – so that we can see the prototypes.

6 Sample time

We'll make comments at the factories. By the end of the trip, they'll have the second prototypes done and we'll approve them before we leave. The factory then makes 1,000 samples. We divide those up and send them out to our sales reps, and they go out and sell the product.

7 Season themes

We usually do three deliveries each season. In each, we'll have a theme, which fits more for graphic tees than anything else. They hit the shop floor about a month apart and refresh it with new colourways, new graphic themes and new apparel pieces.

8 Hometown brand

One thing we have here is a street level of advertising that doesn't exist in a lot of other places. In a city like New York, you're constantly surrounded by it on billboards, and we'll also paste things up onto walls around the city. There's a real love for hometown brands here.

