

City By the Bag

By Elli Thompson Purtell

San Francisco thrives on the explosive success of the tech companies that have made the city home over the past few decades. But before the Googles and Apples of the world brought communication to the fingertips of mainstream America with email attachments and smartphones, businesses had to rely more frequently on delivering messages the old-fashioned way. Bike messengers zig-zagged across the city in the late 80s, delivering parcels and papers with vigor and efficiency, and it was in this heyday that messenger bag company Timbuk2 had its humble beginnings.

In 1989, recent college graduate Rob Honeycutt had just finished biking across the country and decided to take on work as a bike messenger in San Francisco to avoid getting a “real job.” One of his friends, Eric Zoe, hand-stitched messenger bags out of his garage, supplying Rob and other messengers with functional and attractive bags for their work. Over time, Rob began to wonder why Eric's customers had to be confined to the messenger profession. Why not expand access to the city's plentiful commuters who biked to work or took public transportation and could benefit from a more convenient bag? Rob stepped in and began taking personal orders from coworkers, which included all variety of color requests. Always intrigued by manufacturing, Rob was pleased to discover that using separate fabric panels was also more efficient. Just like that, Timbuk2's iconic three-color messenger bag design was born.

Nearly 30 years later, the three-color design remains the company's signature look, and efficient, local manufacturing remains at the heart of the company's mission. Designed not to swing around or take up too much space on public transportation, Timbuk2's bags hold everything a commuter needs, while also looking urban and on-trend.

“San Francisco is a dense city where you bike around or take the train and bus, so all our products are about efficiency—both in usage and production,” says Jesse Gillingham, Business Development Manager at Timbuk2. “When you're making a bag, if you cut your fabric into three pieces, you have less waste. We aim to leave as little footprint as possible and be as sustainable as possible.”

Starting with the first few bags out of Eric Zoe's garage, Timbuk2 gained recognition through word-of-mouth and fellow commuter envy. “When I was a bike messenger in Boston in the 90s, I had a Timbuk2,” Jesse says. “It was a relatively unknown brand, but also a hit. Those who were 'in the know' knew all about it.”

A big breakthrough came when outdoor goods store REI picked up the brand in 2004, followed quickly by other national retailers. Over the past six years, Timbuk2

has opened its own stores across the country. Their classic messenger bag remains popular as a heritage item, with the Uptown and Parkside bags its best-sellers based on functionality and budget. No matter the style, the focus on urban efficiency remains front and center. “If it's a bag, you should be able to bike with it,” Jesse says. “Even our women's high-end collection—you can still ride your bike home with it.”

Timbuk2 isn't shy about the fact that it outsources some of its manufacturing because, despite the physical distance, their overseas factory and San Francisco factory are inextricably linked. “One factory supports the other,” Jesse says. “Even if you're buying a bag that was made overseas, you're supporting the local factory. It's a fantastic story.” Two full-time employees monitor quality control and safety in the overseas factory, and all new products continue to be designed in and inspired by San Francisco. “Everyone on our design team is in love with the city,” Jesse says. “We're not stuffy; we're playful and we're young—or young at heart. We're all in tune with what works because we're commuters ourselves. Company employees can offer feedback. We can say, 'I love the way this bag looks, but I think the zipper should be higher.'”

Timbuk2 also has a deep legacy of giving creative control directly to its customers. Harnessing the spirit of customization that helped the company get off the ground, Rob pioneered the first online retail customization site in the late 1990s, expanding the brand's customer base exponentially. The site was so innovative and successful that it caught the eye of mega-brand Nike, which sought out Rob and his young company for advice on how to launch its own customization site, NIKEiD.

Today, in addition to being able to customize bags online, Timbuk2's stores features customization kiosks, with a range of options for binding, swatching, colors, logos and fabrics. Timbuk2 stores also host customization parties, where groups of coworkers or friends meet after hours to design bags together. A week later, their finished product arrives in the mail, a reminder of a shared experience. “There's something about a bag that presents an emotional connection,” Jesse says. “You have your life for the day in that bag. You get an attachment.”

This attachment is bolstered by Timbuk2's lifetime warranty. Even with the customization program and release of new products and styles, every material must be able to stand the test of time. The company touts the fact that not a single one of its bags has been tossed in the past two years. “Our bags are performance-based; they protect your stuff inside,” Jesse says. “Customers can say, 'I've got Timbuk2 from 20 years ago and I'm still rocking it.'”

Twenty years ago, those bags may have been carrying papers and books. Today, with the same durability and trendiness, they're stowing laptops, tablets and smartphones, supporting the tech industry that at one time may have seemed in direct competition. “Having Apple minutes away and these different tech companies all around us, functionality with tech is something we've always had to integrate, and we do so with pleasure,” Jesse says.

No matter what comes next in the constantly changing world, one thing's for sure: Timbuk2, the hometown brand that locally manufactures efficient, urban bags, will always be along for the ride.