



“We’re Taking Over The WORLD One T-Shirt At A Time”

Eric Hamlin sells \$2 million in apparel – mostly T-shirts – every year. Here are the secrets behind his success. (Hint: The education market is highly involved.)



By Betsy Cummings
Photography: Nicolay Thomassen

The phone came flying across the room. Eric Hamlin reached out and grabbed it as he walked into the interview. “Jeff threw me this cordless phone and said, ‘Call this number and sell them a shirt,’” recalls Hamlin, now the sales manager of Kotis Design LLC (*asi/244898*), an apparel distributor in Seattle.

“Jeff” would be Jeff Becker, the company’s president and baptism-by-fire interviewer. It’s not every job interview where the person on the other side of the desk starts barking out orders. But that was the situation Hamlin found himself in five years ago when he came to Kotis looking for a job.

Hamlin immediately took the phone in his hand. Becker quickly ticked off a number to call. Fumbling with the phone, Hamlin plugged in the digits and waited for somebody on the other end to answer. He had no idea what he was doing.

Hamlin was connected to the University of Tennessee campus. To whom was anyone’s guess. “Hello,” he recalls speaking haltingly into the receiver after a woman picked up on the other end. “We sell customized shirts. Do you need any?”

“Why are you calling me?” the confused prospect shot back. “How did you get this number?”

“I didn’t land that order,” Hamlin says, laughing. “I don’t remember what I said, but somehow I passed the test. I started working the next day.”

A Slow Start

It may have been somewhat of an embarrassing beginning, but Hamlin knew he was cut out for the work. He had read a job posting for T-shirt sales and decided to apply. As the president of his fraternity and purchaser of apparel for fraternity events, he was familiar with Kotis and its product line. But the company's aggressive sales techniques were new to him. He'd have a lot to learn.

These days Hamlin, 26, hawks T-shirts to the tune of \$2 million a year in sales. "We like to say we're taking over the world one T-shirt at a time," he says. He's joking (sort of), but he might as well not be.

Through trial and error and reading any business and sales books he could find, Hamlin dove into the job, hitting the phones all day, covering his "territory," which really was the entire U.S. "I was just trying to skim the fat off the top by making connections with a certain number of people every day," Hamlin says. The more calls he made, he figured, the greater his chances for making those connections.

His first order – to a group, coincidentally, at the University of Tennessee – was a \$600 deal for 80 American Apparel (*asi/35297*) T-shirts to be worn at a sorority-sponsored softball tournament. "It was to Pi Beta Phi," Hamlin recalls. Eventually, "She was one of my best customers," even if Hamlin thought the T-shirt design for that first order – a simple image of two softball bats – was a little dull.

At the time Hamlin and the rest of the company's sales team sold shirts "in classic start-up style" – out of an uncle's basement, getting by on a diet of ramen noodles and adrenalin from a job that paid commission only. The space, Hamlin says, wasn't much bigger than two dorm rooms put together and was almost alarming in its appearance and accessibility. "I had to go to this basement through an alleyway entrance, and there was no signage," he remembers.



Eric Hamlin had a trial by fire when he was asked to make a sales call during his interview at Kotis Design.

“If you can’t find a common bond with a prospect in 30 seconds, you’re just another voice on the phone.”

ERIC HAMLIN, KOTIS DESIGN (ASI/244898)

But that's OK, Hamlin thought. This would be a short-lived gig. Still in school as a drama major with plans to enter law school, he intended for his time at Kotis to be temporary, a way to make extra cash while at college. But what started as a part-time gig making countless outbound calls very quickly became a bigger job. Only a week into it, Hamlin says, he was put in charge of a fellow seller. That employee quit; Hamlin continued on.

Eventually his confidence and selling skills grew. So did his sales, with growth to this day averaging 34% year over year, he says. In fact, Kotis ranked number 29 on the *Puget Sound Business Journal's* List of Fastest-Growing Companies in the Seattle

area, with a three-year revenue growth of 187%. At some point Hamlin realized that selling T-shirts might offer a more rewarding and lucrative career than working as a lawyer – a realization that horrified his parents. "What are you thinking?!" Hamlin recalls his parents saying when he announced he was forgoing law school for a future with Kotis.

He'd just scored a 165 on his LSAT (well above the average score of 150) and showed promise as a future litigator. It wasn't until Hamlin bought his first car – an Audi – with the commissions he made from those T-shirt sales that his father realized that promotional products might not only provide Hamlin a good income, but also

a challenging, fulfilling career. Even further proof of Hamlin's T-shirt success: He recently bought a house in Seattle's gentrified Ballard neighborhood.

Learning The Ropes

In the beginning, Hamlin admits, he was clueless. He'd pick up the phone and call one school after another, saying whatever came to mind. "I shot for 20 calls an hour if I could do it," he says from his office, which, today, sits two blocks from the University of Washington campus in an office building rather than a basement.

At first Hamlin jumped in with whatever pitch he could, beefing up his message through self-education from business books. Over time he crafted a loose script, and decided to focus on the "relationship sell" he'd read so much about in those books and experienced organically in his dealings with clients.

Today that's the idea Hamlin emphasizes to his 15-person sales staff, which focuses on the collegiate market. "We call it the 30-second relationship," he says. "If you can't find a common bond with a prospect in 30 seconds, you're just another voice on the phone."

How to make that connection? Learn your market and your client. For starters, Hamlin makes sure he knows the school mascot, colors, schedule and scores of athletic teams, changes going on around campus, new academic developments, happenings at the latest tailgate parties – literally anything that could be a conversation starter. He lets the prospect know that he not only knows T-shirts, he knows a lot about the school he'll be selling the T-shirts to. "If there's a hurricane off of Florida and I'm calling a school there, I bring it up," he says. "If you can have a bond beyond just being a sales prospect, then they'll remember you."

Speaking the lifestyle language of his prospects and clients is crucial, Hamlin

Eric Hamlin makes it his business to know everything he can about his clients and their market.



“What are you thinking?!”

ERIC HAMLIN'S PARENTS,
UPON LEARNING HE WAS FOREGOING LAW SCHOOL FOR A CAREER SELLING T-SHIRTS.

says, which is why he focuses exclusively on and sells deep into the college arena, rather than turning his attention to unfamiliar markets. "I can't call someone in the finance industry or the medical industry because I know nothing about it," he says. "I've tried and crashed and burned."

But, when it comes to the academic arena, Hamlin says, "I have no problem calling the athletic director" at any college or university and jumping in about the team's record, because he's familiar and comfortable with the dialogue amongst college campuses. That helps to establish a relaxed, friendly rapport with prospects.

And though Hamlin is a proponent of

scripts, the key to high sales, says the former drama major, is knowing when to ad-lib. "If you can take a script and memorize and internalize it and you understand the flow of how a conversation should go, you can improvise," he says. "The best actors memorize a storyline and know the script so they can fall back on it, but most of their lines are ad-libbed."

A Loyal Following

That free-flowing attitude also extends to Hamlin's views on developing customer loyalty, offering to fulfill orders and make clients happy even if it means stepping way beyond his responsibilities. Recently, when

“Eric is motivated and driven and always trying to improve things.”

JEFF BECKER, KOTIS DESIGN (ASI/244898)

a client’s order at the University of Oregon looked like it was going to be a day late, Hamlin offered to drive the order two-and-a-half hours from Seattle to Eugene, OR, to make sure the client would get it on the day requested.

Of course, having that kind of dedication to customer service means that Hamlin is rarely off the job. Even when he’s not working, he’s focused on T-shirts. “I’m obsessive compulsive when it comes to what people are wearing,” says Hamlin,

who admits he was never fashionable in college. “Now my friends know if they’re wearing a shirt that’s new, I’ll touch it and feel it. I’ll look at the tag and tell them it’s a Peruvian cotton or that it’s a burnout style or a longer-length shirt.”

That knowledge required heavy immersion and education in apparel manufacturing, Hamlin says. “It took me at least two years to really understand all the different nuances of basic tees,” he says. Once he knew the shirts, he conquered his clients.

“We like to say that we sell sexy,” Hamlin jokes, because so many of his clients are sororities. That means sourcing the latest trendy tee. This year, for example, that means American Apparel’s Deep V-Neck T-shirt.

“I think the way Eric works is the same way our business does, which is to be motivated and driven and always trying to improve things,” Becker says. “I think a lot of companies are OK with where they’re at. We’re not OK with where we’re at.”

Not ever, says Becker, who started Kotis with his brother Daniel and another partner, Nicolay Thomassen, while the three were students at the University of Washington. And what was once just the three of them has grown into a multi-million dollar operation with 34 employees. Now there is no limit to how big the company could get, and Becker says Hamlin exhibits the same attitude toward collegiate T-shirt sales – that there’s no limit to how big the business could expand.

With the market contracting a bit, that growth will mean penetrating some of the markets where Hamlin hasn’t had as much success. “We’re really strong on the west coast,” he says, but admits he struggles more with the style sensibilities of southern colleges. “We don’t quite get the southern vibe,” he says. “They wear a lot of pocket tees. I’ve never worn one in my life, but they all want that.”

And giving clients what they want is Hamlin’s specialty. Says Becker, “Eric’s had lots of opportunities to sell other things, but he’s very focused on what he is selling, and that’s shirts.” ○

Betsy Cummings is senior writer for Counselor.

SECRETS FROM A \$2 Million T-shirt Seller

Want to sell \$2 million a year in T-shirts like Kotis Design’s sales manager Eric Hamlin? It’s possible, Hamlin says. He’s reached that milestone by sticking to the tips below.

- **Obsess about products.** Even when Hamlin isn’t working, he’s on the job. He never assumes he knows all there is to know about apparel, and he constantly looks for new T-shirt designs, materials, decorating processes and manufacturing methods. It’s the key to staying on top of an increasingly nuanced, changing marketplace.

- **Numbers beget numbers.** When he started out with no sales experience, Hamlin made one assumption: The number of sales he made would be dependent on the number of prospects he contacted. To that end, he set hourly goals – 20 phone calls an hour, for example – and stuck to them until he’d penetrated much of his regional market.

- **Keep it loose.** A drama major in college, ad-libbing comes naturally to Hamlin. Forming a general sales script is key, he says, but truly successful sellers know when to leave the script behind and create a fresh dialogue on the fly.

- **Connect with prospects:** Hamlin believes in relationship selling, and he says he successfully connects with his customers by doing enough research to know their business and their challenges. Plus, it never hurts, he says, to know the latest current events surrounding their operation – or in his case, their school. The key is to have something at the ready that allows you to connect quickly with a prospect on the phone on a personal level. “If you can’t find a common bond with a prospect in 30 seconds, you’re just another voice on the phone,” Hamlin says. – BC